

Shared Leadership in the Early Church: The Plural Office of Elder/Bishop

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Abstract

Ecclesiastical governance reflects underlying theological commitments, embodying and reinforcing beliefs about ministry and leadership. Conceptions of church governance also contribute to the well-being and the dysfunction of congregations. Therefore, this study explores Christian polity by examining key New Testament terms — *πρεσβύτερος* (elder), *ἐπίσκοπος* (overseer/bishop), and *ποιμήν* (shepherd/pastor) — to gain a better understanding of early church governance. We find that New Testament texts do not distinguish between the offices of elder and bishop. The mono-episcopacy, with a sharp delineation between these two positions, appears to have emerged at the very end of the first century or the beginning of the second century CE. Additionally, elders/bishops, rather than ‘pastors’ occupying a unique office, pastored or shepherded God’s people. Finally, early churches practised plural leadership with multiple individuals leading simultaneously. These insights challenge contemporary governance models in which a single pastoral authority dominates, reminding us that ministry is the shared responsibility of the body of Christ.

Keywords

Leadership; governance; polity; bishop; elder; pastor; New Testament; patristics

Introduction

Rules and norms of church governance and leadership are, in the words of the theologian and priest Paul Avis, ‘covert theological statements’.¹

¹ Paul Avis, ‘Editorial: From Ecclesiology to Ecclesiastical Polity’, *Ecclesiology*, 11.3 (2015), pp. 285–88 (p. 286), doi:10.1163/17455316-01103002.

How a congregation governs itself embodies and reinforces both conscious and subconscious theological ideas. For instance, a plural leadership model could be an expression of or foster a commitment to the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers (e.g. Exod 19:5–6 and 1 Pet 2:4–9). Similarly, a strong clergy-laity divide, in formal structure or in practice, can limit ‘lay’ Christians’ vision of and engagement in ministry — implicitly reinforcing the idea that ministry is the purview primarily of pastors or priests. Moreover, ecclesiastical structure is a factor in numerous challenges facing contemporary Christianity. A reduced view of eldership is an element in the recent spate of high-profile firings of domineering pastors. Singular leadership models can be fertile soil for the growth of egocentric ‘celebrity pastors’ and personality cults. Additionally, the over-reliance on professional clergy is increasingly difficult to sustain as seminary enrolments decline.

With these considerations in mind, this article examines New Testament and other early Christian writings to gain a fuller understanding of ecclesiastical governance and leadership. Our research focuses on the Greek words *πρεσβύτερος* (elder), *ἐπίσκοπος* (overseer or bishop), *ἐπισκοπή* (bishopric), *ἐπισκοπέω* (to oversee), and, to a lesser extent *ποιμήν* (shepherd or pastor) and *ποιμαίνω* (to shepherd or pastor). These terms are central to Christian ecclesiology, past and present.

Evidence from Scripture and other sources supports several conclusions. First, New Testament texts do not distinguish between the offices of elder and bishop. The mono-episcopacy, with a sharp delineation between these two positions, appears to have emerged in the very late first century or early second century CE. Additionally, elders/bishops, rather than ‘pastors’ occupying a unique office, pastored or shepherded churches. In fact, little evidence exists of a separate office of pastor or shepherd in the New Testament or other early Christian writings. Finally, many churches practised plural or shared leadership, with multiple individuals often holding the titles of elder and bishop.

New Testament and Offices in the Early Church

The New Testament is undoubtedly the most significant source of information on early Christian polity. Therefore, in this section, we examine key biblical texts related to the offices of the early church. The following analysis does not purport to excavate *the* unique or universal model of church leadership in the New Testament. Instead, what follows aims to introduce the most relevant passages, themes, and terms related to New Testament church offices. While focusing principally on πρεσβύτερος (elder), ἐπίσκοπος (overseer or bishop), and ποιμήν (pastor or shepherd), this section also touches on διάκονος (deacon), ἀποστόλος (apostle), ιερέας (priest), and several other related terms. Furthermore, the treatment of New Testament texts below is not comprehensive — the length of a journal article does not permit such an approach. On the contrary, the goal of this section, and the article more broadly, includes two more circumspect outcomes: (a) to provide an overview of early Christian polity; and (b) to illuminate the most essential lines for further exploration.

Πρεσβύτερος and Ἐπίσκοπος Describe the Same Office in the New Testament

One of the central questions of New Testament ecclesiastical structure is the relationship between πρεσβύτερος and ἐπίσκοπος. Acts 20:17–28 sheds light on this topic. The passage records Paul delivering a farewell address to the church leaders in Ephesus. He had spent several years with these early Christians and now sought to encourage them on his way to Jerusalem at the end of his third missionary journey. Luke writes, in the opening verse of the pericope, that Paul called the πρεσβύτερος of the Ephesian church to meet with him in Miletus (Acts 20:17). In their gathering, Paul admonished the elders to ‘keep watch over yourselves and over all the flock, of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers [ἐπίσκοπος]’ (Acts 20:28).² Having called the ‘elders’ to meet with him, Paul subsequently used the appellation ‘overseers’ or ‘bishops’ to describe them. A similar semantic overlap of πρεσβύτερος and ἐπίσκοπος occurs in the Epistle to Titus. The opening chapter instructs

² All English language biblical quotations, unless otherwise indicated, come from the *Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*, updated edn (HarperOne, 2022).

Titus to appoint *πρεσβύτερος* in cities across Crete (Titus 1:5). Shortly thereafter, the author uses the term *ἐπίσκοπος* to describe these same future church leaders (Titus 1:7).

The first chapter of Titus then proceeds to list nearly twenty qualifications of *πρεσβύτερος/ἐπίσκοπος*. The First Epistle to Timothy, which discusses the qualifications for *ἐπίσκοπος*, includes an enumeration (1 Tim 3:1–7) that closely resembles the one in Titus. Five characteristics match exactly in Greek between the two texts: *πρεσβύτερος* and *ἐπίσκοπος* should be the husband of one wife, self-controlled, hospitable, not addicted to wine, and not pugnacious. A sixth qualification is not identical in Greek, but it is close. In Titus, an elder/bishop must hold ‘tightly to the trustworthy word of the teaching, so that he may be able both to exhort with sound instruction and to refute those who contradict it’ (Titus 1:9). Similarly, 1 Timothy stipulates that bishops must be able to teach (1 Tim 3:2). Finally, a pair of additional strong parallels exist between the two lists of qualifications: (a) ‘not be [...] greedy for gain’ (Titus 1:7) and ‘not a lover of money’ (1 Tim 3:3); and (b) ‘not [...] quick-tempered’ (Titus 1:7) and ‘temperate’ (1 Tim 3:2).

Both *πρεσβύτερος* and *ἐπίσκοπος* are also connected to the word *προϊστημι*. This verb means either ‘to exercise a position of leadership, rule, direct, to be the head (of)’ or ‘to have an interest in, show concern for, care for, give aid’.³ The third chapter of 1 Timothy lists the ability to rule or care for (*προϊστημι*) one’s own home as a qualification for becoming an *ἐπίσκοπος* (1 Tim 3:4). Similarly, chapter five states that ‘the *πρεσβύτερος* who lead/care (*προϊστημι*) well are to be considered worthy of double honour’ (1 Tim 5:17a). Thus, both *πρεσβύτερος* and *ἐπίσκοπος* are responsible for leading/caring well. The parallelism is weakened somewhat by the different contexts of these two pericopes: (a) the households of prospective bishops in chapter three, and (b) congregations in chapter five. However, the use of the same verb in the list of qualifications for both *πρεσβύτερος* and *ἐπίσκοπος* supports the

³ Walter Bauer, ‘*προϊστημι*’, in *A Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. by F. W. Danker, 3rd edn (University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 870.

equivalence seen elsewhere of these two offices. Moreover, Timothy was well acquainted with the Christian church in Ephesus, having served there before receiving the Epistle of 1 Timothy (1 Tim 1:3). As stated above, the book of Acts documents the leadership of πρεσβύτερος who were also called ἐπίσκοπος (Acts 20:28) in the Ephesian church. Thus, Acts and 1 Timothy agree in their characterisations of the ecclesiastical structure of the church in Ephesus: πρεσβύτερος/ἐπίσκοπος.

A final Epistle, 1 Peter, bolsters the conclusion that πρεσβύτερος and ἐπίσκοπος refer to the same church office in the New Testament. Peter exhorts πρεσβυτέρους (a plural form of πρεσβύτερος) to ‘exercis[e] the oversight, not under compulsion but willingly’ (1 Pet 5:2). The word translated as ‘to oversee’, ἐπισκοποῦντες, is a participial form of the verb ἐπισκοπέω — a cognate of the noun ἐπίσκοπος. Thus, Peter records elders overseeing or acting as bishops in congregations.

As a set, these texts suggest that πρεσβύτερος and ἐπίσκοπος were two terms for the same ecclesiastical office.⁴ No text of the New Testament provides clear evidence to the contrary. Thus, we conclude that the delineation between elder and bishop, evident later in the writings of Ignatius of Antioch and others (see the section on the patristic writings later in the article), is not attested in the New Testament.

Wide-Spread Geographic and Chronological Occurrence of Πρεσβύτερος or Ἐπίσκοπος in the New Testament

The geographical spread of the office of πρεσβύτερος/ἐπίσκοπος is also noteworthy as a sign of its broad acceptance. Table 1 shows the locations with which these terms are associated in the New Testament. The office described as both πρεσβύτερος and ἐπίσκοπος is associated

⁴ This is not to suggest that πρεσβύτερος and ἐπίσκοπος have the same semantic ranges in Greek. The two words may convey different or overlapping aspects of the same office within the church. New Testament scholar Gordon Fee makes this point. Gordon Fee, ‘Review of *The Elder and Overseer: One Office in the Early Church*, Studies in Biblical Literature 57, by Benjamin L. Merkle’, *Themelios*, 29.3 (2004), online, no page number <<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/review/the-elder-and-overseer-one-office-in-the-early-church-studies-in-biblical-literature-57/>> [accessed 12 November 2025].

with Ephesus, Crete, and the recipients of 1 Peter (Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia). Additionally, one of the two terms refers to a church office in Antioch, Iconium, Jerusalem, Lystra, Philippi, and the location(s) of the intended audience of the Epistle of James. Yet the New Testament says little about the ecclesiastical structure of congregations in cities such as Rome, Corinth, Galatia, and Colossae. Thus, Table 1 reveals a pattern rather than a definitive doctrine of ecclesiastical structure.

Table 1 Office of Elder/Overseer in NT Congregations

Location	Πρεσβύτερος	Ἐπίσκοπος
Jerusalem	Acts 14, 21	
Ephesus	Acts 20, 1 Timothy 5	Acts 20, 1 Timothy 3
Philippi		Philippians 1
Lystra	Acts 14	
Iconium	Acts 14	
Antioch of Pisidia	Acts 14	
‘appoint [...] in every city’ of Titus’s location (Crete)	Titus 1	Titus 1
James’s audience	James 5	
Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia	1 Peter 5	1 Peter 5

In addition to providing evidence of the wide geographical spread of elders/bishops, the New Testament records testimony of the office from a broad range of influential early Christian leaders and the traditions associated with them. The apostles Peter and Paul, James, the brother of Jesus, and Luke all refer to this office, and each of them does so using both *πρεσβύτερος* and *ἐπίσκοπος*. Furthermore, Timothy must have been acquainted with this office, given its mention in 1 Timothy and his connection to the church in Ephesus.

The office of elder/bishop is also attested over a relatively broad New Testament chronology.⁵ Church leaders holding this position existed in Jerusalem at least as early as the mid-40s of the first century CE (Acts 11:30). Later in that same decade, Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in the churches they planted (Acts 14:23). Elders also presided along with apostles in approximately 49 CE at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:2, 4, 6, 22, 23; 16:4). In the mid- to late-50s, Paul addressed the Ephesian elders/bishops in Miletus (Acts 20). Finally, at the end of his third missionary journey (in the late 50s), Paul saw ‘James and all the elders’ of the Jerusalem church (Acts 21:17–18).

Plural Church Leadership in the New Testament

A key question regarding elders/bishops in the New Testament is their number within a particular church. As Table 2 shows, in almost half of the pericopes that describe churches as having the office of elder or bishop, the text indicates an office with multiple concurrent officeholders: the churches in Ephesus (Acts 20), Jerusalem, Philippi, Thessaloniki,⁶ and the location(s) of James’s audience. In the remaining cases — Antioch of Pisidia, Crete, Iconium, Lystra, Peter’s audience, and Ephesus (1 Timothy) — the New Testament authors did not specify the number of leaders of local churches at a given time.

There are, however, no unambiguous examples of a New Testament church with an office of elder or bishop occupied by only one individual at one time (see section below, ‘An Apostolic Office in the New Testament?’ for comments on James in Jerusalem). The Greek texts of the cases in the ‘ambiguous’ column of Table 2 do not clearly indicate whether the offices are singular or plural. For example, Acts 14 — the chapter which records Paul and Barnabas appointing elders in Antioch of Pisidia, Iconium, and Lystra — states, ‘they had appointed elders for them in every church’ (Acts 14:23). This phrase could signify

⁵ Robert W. Yarbrough, *1–3 John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Baker Academic, 2008), pp. 329–330.

⁶ 1 Thessalonians 5:12 uses the Greek word *προϊστῆμι* for church leaders. See section below on ‘Other Terms for New Testament Church Leaders’ for a discussion of this Greek term.

one elder in each congregation or multiple elders in every congregation, or some mixture of the two.

Table 2. Plural versus Singular Leadership

Location	Plural	Singular	Ambiguous
Jerusalem	Elders		
Ephesus (Acts 20)	Elders/Overseers		
Ephesus (1 Timothy)			Elder(s)/Overseer(s)/ Position of ruling or caring for others (προϊστημι)
Philippi	Overseers		
Lystra			Elder(s)
Iconium			Elder(s)
Antioch of Pisidia			Elder(s)
Thessaloniki	Those who rule or direct (προϊστημι)		
‘In every city’ of Titus’s location (Crete)			Elder(s)/Overseer(s)
James’s audience	Elders		
1 Peter’s audience			Elder(s)/Overseer(s)

Two-tier New Testament Church Leadership Structure: Elders/Bishops and Deacons

Though the office of διάκονος (deacon, minister, or server) is not the focus of this article, it appears three times in the New Testament alongside ἐπίσκοπος as an ecclesiastical office of lesser authority.⁷ These

⁷ For scholarly discussion on the meaning of διάκονος in the New Testament, see John N. Collins, *Diakonia: Re-Interpreting the Ancient Sources*, rev. edn (Oxford University Press, 2009); James W. McKinnon, ‘On the Meaning of *Diakonos*’, *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 26.1 (1964), pp.

two cases occur in Philippians 1 and 1 Timothy 3. Acts 6 arguably constitutes a third case with its distinction between those dedicated to serving or ministering ‘the word of God’ and those who would serve or minister to widows. This passage uses the noun *διάκονος* and the verb *διακονέω*, yet it does not use a specific title for those engaged in the ministry of the Word. These four texts demonstrate the relative prominence in early Christianity of a two-tiered leadership model with elders/bishops and deacons.

Yet, Acts 6 cautions against an overly rigid distinction between elders and deacons. Stephen, shortly after being elected as one of the first seven deacons, performed wonders and signs, debated publicly, and preached with great wisdom. He did all these things on his way to becoming the first known Christian martyr. Thus, the New Testament suggests neither that elders/bishops are uniquely permitted to teach and preach nor that deacons are prohibited from such activity.

An Apostolic Office in the New Testament?

The author of Acts uses the term *πρεσβύτερος* four times to describe leaders in the Jerusalem church. In two of these instances, Acts 11:30 and 21:18, the word occurs without another potential descriptor of a church office. On the other two occasions, the text pairs *πρεσβύτερος* with *ἀπόστολος*. After the Jerusalem Council, the ‘apostles and elders, with the whole church’ sent a letter whose first line was, ‘The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the brothers and sisters of gentile origin in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greetings’ (Acts 15:22–23). Shortly thereafter, Luke records that Paul and Timothy, ‘as they went from town to town, they delivered to them for observance the decisions that had been reached by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem’ (Acts 16:4).

Although the relationship between apostles and elders in the New Testament warrants a more detailed treatment than the scope and length of this article permit, the following discussion highlights several

14–20; and Moisés Silva, ‘*διάκονος*’, in *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis*, vol. 1, ed. by Moisés Silva (Zondervan, 2014), pp. 768–774.

crucial observations.⁸ First, Acts 15:13 (the Jerusalem Council) and 21:18 may indicate that James, the brother of Jesus, held a singular leadership position or presiding role among the apostles and elders in Jerusalem. Second, if James held a unique position, it does not appear to have carried a unique title apart from ‘apostle’ or ‘elder’. Third, Acts 15 places James among the apostles and elders of Jerusalem, whereas Acts 21:18 mentions James alongside the elders only. Thus, the author of Acts viewed James as an apostle and likely also an elder.⁹ Finally, the apostles and elders in Jerusalem are always described as plural groups. Taken together, these texts suggest that James occupied a leading position among the apostles and elders in Jerusalem; however, he does not appear to have held any office or position other than that of apostle and, probably, also elder.¹⁰ Thus, James was not the occupant of a unique and singular ecclesiastical office. Instead, he was most likely a *primus inter pares* among the leaders of the Jerusalem church.

On a related note, Acts 1:20 employs the term ἐπισκοπή, a cognate of ἐπίσκοπος, to signify the position vacated by Judas and subsequently filled by Matthias. Later in the same passage, the author describes this office as both a ‘ministry’ (διακονία) and an ‘apostleship’ (ἀποστολή) (Acts 1:25). Based on this passage and other evidence, the twelve apostles may have held a unique office in the Lucan–Acts view. Raymond Brown follows this interpretation, distinguishing between the apostolic office of the twelve apostles and a broader apostolic gifting of Christians.¹¹ According to this reading, the former type of apostleship ceased to exist after the twelve apostles died. The latter, broader form of apostleship has existed throughout the history of the church and may

⁸ For detailed examinations of apostleship in the New Testament, see Francis H. Agnew, ‘The Origin of the NT Apostle-Concept: A Review of Research’, *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 105.1 (1986), pp. 75–96, doi:10.2307/3261112; Mark Schuler, ‘The First Apostles’, *Global South Theological Journal*, 2.1 (July 6, 2023), pp. 3–10, doi:10.57003/gstj.v2i1.13.

⁹ Paul also calls James an ‘apostle’ in what is likely an account of the same Acts 21 gathering (Gal 1:18–19).

¹⁰ For a fuller discussion of James and the Jerusalem church, see F. F. Bruce, *Peter, Stephen, James, and John: Non-Pauline Diversity in the Early Church* (Kingsley Books, 2017). Bruce regards James as an elder in the church of Jerusalem based on Acts 21.

¹¹ Raymond E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (Paulist Press, 1979).

or may not coincide with an ecclesiastical office. Thus, 1 Clement 42:1–5 records the original generation of apostles preaching the gospel and appointing elders and deacons, rather than new apostles.

Brown makes two additional related observations. First, ‘There is no NT evidence that any of the Twelve ever served as head of local congregations.’¹² Second, the traditional identification of some of the twelve apostles as bishops is not found in first-century texts; it derives from the second century or later. James D. G. Dunn, the late New Testament scholar, extends this conversation to the apostleship of Paul, concluding, ‘No category of church “office” is adequate to describe [Paul’s] function: he was not appointed by the Church, and Paul certainly did not conceive of any succeeding to his apostleship.’¹³ Additionally, the New Testament never describes Paul as a bishop or an elder.

Ποιμήν and Ποιμαίνω in the New Testament

In contemporary Protestant churches, the title most often applied to the leader(s) of a congregation is likely ‘pastor’. Translations of the Greek New Testament generally render the noun ποιμήν as ‘shepherd’ or ‘pastor’ and the related verb ποιμαίνω as ‘to shepherd’ or ‘to pastor’. Most occurrences of these two Greek words describe either Jesus (e.g. Matt 2:6, 9:36, 25:32, 26:31; Mark 14:27; Heb 13:20; 1 Pet 2:25, 5:4; Rev 7:17) or individuals who care for actual sheep (Luke 2:8, 2:15, 2:18, 2:20).

However, the New Testament uses ποιμήν or ποιμαίνω four times in the context of ecclesiastical offices. Both Acts and 1 Peter charge πρεσβύτερος and ἐπίσκοπος with shepherding (ποιμαίνω) the church of God (Acts 20:28) or the flock of God (1 Pet 5:2). Thus, these two pericopes show that the roles or functions of elder, bishop, and pastor are unified in several New Testament churches. Moreover, no New Testament passage, except possibly Ephesians 4:11–12, describes an office of pastor or shepherd.

¹² Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple*, p. 325.

¹³ James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of Early Christianity*, 3rd edn (SCM Press, 2006), p. 121.

A third passage, in the Gospel of John, records Jesus telling Peter to shepherd (ποιμαίνω) Jesus's metaphorical sheep (John 21:15–17). That Jesus gives this responsibility to Peter, who later calls himself a *πρεσβύτερος* (1 Pet 5:1), supports, albeit modestly, the pastoral function of elders. Peter's status as one of the twelve disciples and his special role in the kingdom of heaven (e.g. Matt 16:18) warrant caution in linking the office of elder and the function of shepherding solely via his person.

The fourth pericope that links ποιμήν or ποιμαίνω to an ecclesiastical office outside of Acts 13:1, namely Ephesians 4:11–12, may articulate the most significant alternative to the elder/bishop church leadership pattern in the New Testament. Paul wrote, God 'himself granted that some are apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ'. Additionally, the Epistle to the Ephesians never mentions elders or bishops. Thus, some interpret the five terms in chapter four as denoting offices or positions within the church.

However, this interpretation creates several difficulties. First, the New Testament offers little support elsewhere for the offices of prophet, evangelist, shepherd, or teacher. While a case can be made for an apostolic office, that view would rely heavily on these two verses and the Jerusalem church (see section above). Second, the text of Ephesians does not state that any of these five terms is meant to describe an ecclesiastical office. Third, as discussed above, other texts associate the tasks of shepherding (Acts 20 and 1 Pet 5) and teaching (1 Tim 5:17 and Titus 1:9) with the office of elder/bishop. Moreover, one of the passages linking the office of elder/bishop to teaching deals directly with the elders of the Ephesian church (Acts 20).

These observations suggest that Paul did not intend for readers to view apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds, or teachers as church offices. The New Testament exegete, Frank Thielman, notes, "The most probable understanding of the text places the emphasis less on the positions that certain people hold in the church and more on the

activities that Christ has equipped certain people to perform.’¹⁴ Therefore, he concludes, ‘the most probable interpretation of this verse sees it as a reference to the work of all believers’.¹⁵ Similarly, Lynn Cohick, a New Testament scholar, observes, ‘Paul is not interested here in a particular church structure [...] these five functions or tasks serve to equip the church for its ministry.’¹⁶ She also notes that ‘the emphasis is on a team who by God’s grace strengthens the church’.¹⁷ Thus, Ephesians 4:11–12 supports the concept of plural leadership within the church.

Other Related Biblical Texts and Terms

Though an article of this length cannot aim to provide an exhaustive picture of New Testament texts related to congregational polity, several additional items require preliminary commentary.

Other Uses of πρεσβύτερος

The term πρεσβύτερος is used in several additional ways in the New Testament. It occurs a total of twenty-five times in the synoptic gospels. In these three gospels, ‘elder(s)’ primarily signifies a group of leaders of Israel, also described as ‘elders of the people’ or ‘elders of the Jews’ (Matt 21:33; 26:3, 47; 27:1; Luke 7:3; 20:1; 22:66), during the time of Jesus’s ministry. These leaders are often mentioned in conjunction with the high priest (Matt 26:3, 57; Mark 14:53), the chief priests, (Matt 16:21; 21:23; 26:3; 26:47; 26:57; 27:1; 27:3, 12, 20, 41; 28:12; Mark 8:31; 11:27; 12:12; 14:43; 15:1; Luke 9:22; 20:1; 22:52, 66), teachers of the law (Matt 16:21; 26:57; 27:41; Mark 8:31; 11:27; 12:12; 14:43; 14:53; 15:1; Luke 9:22; 20:1; 22:52, 66), and Sanhedrin (Matt 26:57–59; Mark 15:1). In addition, two gospels report Jesus speaking of ‘the tradition of the elders’ (Matt 15:2; Mark 7:3, 5).

¹⁴ Frank Thielman, *Ephesians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Baker Academic, 2010), p. 273.

¹⁵ Thielman, *Ephesians*, p. 290.

¹⁶ Lynn H. Cohick, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, ed. by Joel B. Green (Eerdmans, 2020), pp. 265–270.

¹⁷ Cohick, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, p. 265.

Acts also uses *πρεσβύτερος* to signify the elders of the Jewish people (Acts 4:5, 8, 23; 5:21; 6:12; 23:14; 24:1; 25:15). Like the synoptic gospels, Acts associates this cadre of leaders, also called ‘the elders of Israel’ (Acts 5:21), with the high priest (Acts 5:21; 24:1), chief priests (4:23; 23:14; 25:15), teachers of the law (Acts 4:5; 6:12), and the Sanhedrin (Acts 5:21; 6:12). Furthermore, Acts describes elders as rulers (Acts 4:5, 8).

In addition, *πρεσβύτερος* occasionally signifies persons who are chronologically older or from a prior generation. Thus, Hebrews 11:2 uses the term to praise the faith of Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, and others from much earlier in the history of God’s people. On a related note, two Epistles of John begin by identifying John as ‘the elder’ (*πρεσβύτερος*) (2 John 1:1; 3 John 1:1). New Testament scholar I. Howard Marshall noted two possibilities for the interpretation of this title: ‘The word originally meant an old man, but it also came to be used quite naturally for a person exercising oversight and leadership. As such, it was used for leaders in Jewish communities, and it came to be used for groups of leaders in early Christian churches.’¹⁸ The Johannine title may encompass both meanings. However, little concrete evidence exists to determine the exact meaning of the term in this case.

Another Johannine text, the book of Revelation, employs *πρεσβύτερος* twelve times (Rev 4:4, 10; 5:5, 6, 8, 11, 14; 7:11, 13; 11:16; 14:3; and 19:4). Each of these passages refers to the twenty-four elders seated around the heavenly throne of the Lord. Potentially, the plurality of elders in the heavenly vision supports the plurality of elders in the early church. However, given its unique context, Revelation does not provide direct evidence for understanding the role and number of elders/bishops in early Christian churches.

Other Uses of Ἐπίσκοπος and Cognates

The Greek New Testament contains two cognates of *ἐπίσκοπος*: *ἐπισκοπέω* and *ἐπισκοπή*. The verb *ἐπισκοπέω*, in addition to connoting

¹⁸ I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1978), p. 42.

a function of oversight belonging to elders in 1 Peter 5:2, signifies an exhortation ‘see to it’, or perhaps something like ‘be careful to’, in Hebrews 12:15. The noun ἐπισκοπή connotes a ‘visitation’ (Luke 19:44; 1 Pet. 2:12) and, as already discussed, the ‘office of bishop’ (1 Tim 3:1) or ‘overseer’ (Acts 1:20). The latter case is interesting because it connects, at least lexically, apostles and the bishopric as it employs ἐπισκοπή to signify the position vacated by Judas and filled by Matthias. Additionally, the noun ἐπισκοπος, while primarily used for the ecclesiastical office of bishop/elder as discussed above, also indicates an ‘overseer’ or ‘guardian’ in a more general sense (1 Pet 2:25).

Other Terms for New Testament Church Leaders

New Testament authors use a variety of other words to describe ecclesiastical leadership. Acts reports that ‘prophets and teachers’ led the church of Antioch (Acts 13:1). Dunn described this as an early Hellenistic pattern of church leadership, preceding the elder/bishop model seen in the Pastoral Epistles.¹⁹ Yet, in this earlier framework, which he called ‘the body of Christ as charismatic community’, ministry belonged to all Christians, not only to ‘the special ministry of a few’.²⁰ Thus, while the Antioch church structure differed in nomenclature, and likely also in substance, from the elder/bishop model, it relied on plural leadership.

The book of Acts also employs the Greek word κληρος (portion, share) in the account of naming Judas’s successor among the twelve disciples.²¹ Matthias received ‘a share’ (κληρος) of the ministry (διακονίας) of the disciples (Acts 1:17). By the time of Origen (third century), κληρος had become an established term for those who hold office in the church.²² Additionally, the term κληρικὸς, deriving from κληρος, became a synonym for church leadership in later centuries. Moreover, the contemporary English word ‘cleric’ derives from κληρος through the Latin term *clerus*.

¹⁹ Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, p. 120.

²⁰ Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, p. 120.

²¹ BDAG, p. 548, s.v. ‘κληρος’.

²² David Watson, *I Believe in the Church* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1978), pp. 248–249.

1 Thessalonians 5:12 utilises another term, *προϊστημι* ('to exercise a position of leadership, rule, direct, be at the head (of)'), for church leaders in Thessaloniki.²³ The author of 1 Timothy associates this verb with *ἐπισκοπος* (1 Tim 3:4) and *πρεσβύτερος* (1 Tim 5:17), and Romans uses *προϊστημι* in a discussion of the one body of Christ, in which members have different gifts. In the latter case, Christians may have gifts of prophecy, service, teaching, encouragement, generosity, leadership (*προϊστημι*), or mercy (Rom 12:6–8).

The book of Hebrews speaks of those leading over you, using a participial form of the word *ἡγέομαι* (Heb 13:17).²⁴ The author commands Christians to 'obey your leaders (*ἡγούμενος*) and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls as those who will give an account' (Heb 13:17). The idea here of 'keeping watch' (*ἀγρουπνέω*) resonates closely with the verb 'to oversee' (*ἐπισκοπέω*).

Priesthood in New Testament Church Polity

A final crucial note on New Testament ecclesiology, before turning to early patristic writings, is to observe that the New Testament does not attest to a Christian office of priest.²⁵ The Greek noun *ιερεῖς* (priest), rather than signifying a church office or church leader in the New Testament, applies to all followers of Christ. In the apocalyptic vision of Revelation, Jesus makes all Christians into 'a kingdom and priests serving our God' (Rev 5:10). Revelation also employs *ιερεῖς* to describe all Christians as a 'kingdom, priests serving his God and Father' (Rev 1:6) and 'priests of God and of Christ' (Rev 20:6). Similarly, 1 Peter uses the cognate *ιεράτευμα* (priesthood) twice, the only time it occurs in the New Testament, to describe all Christians forming a 'holy priesthood' and 'royal priesthood' (1 Pet 2:4–9).

²³ BDAG, p. 870, s.v. 'προϊστημι'.

²⁴ Danker defines *ἡγέομαι* as 'to be in a supervisory capacity, *lead, guide*'. BDAG, p. 434, s.v. 'ἡγέομαι'.

²⁵ For a list of terms, such as priest, that are not used in the New Testament to describe ecclesiastical leadership, see Eduard Schweizer, *Church Order in the New Testament* (SCM Press, 1961), p. 171.

Early Christian Ecclesiology outside of the New Testament

*Plural Leadership and Two-Tiered Church Polity*²⁶

The earliest surviving textual information about Christian ecclesiology outside the New Testament comes from the *Didache* and *1 Clement*. Both documents include a two-tier model of plural local church governance.

The *Didache*, or ‘The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles’, is one of the earliest surviving non-canonical writings of Christianity.²⁷ Dating to the late first or early second century, the letter is a collection of instructions about Christian living and worship. It discusses bishops (ἐπίσκοπος) and deacons, but not elders (πρεσβύτερος), in a single brief section. The text enjoins local churches to appoint bishops and deacons. Both words are plural in the text, though that plurality could be within a congregation or across congregations in one locale. These officers of the church should be ‘worthy of the Lord’, ‘humble’, ‘true’, ‘approved’, and ‘not avaricious’ (*Did.* 15:1). The latter qualification recalls requirements for bishops in 1 Timothy 3:3 (‘not a lover of money’) and elders/bishops in Titus 1:7 (‘not greedy for gain’).

However, the *Didache* devotes significantly more space to discussing apostles and prophets than bishops and deacons. The peripatetic apostles it describes are not explicitly vested with ecclesiastical authority. Moreover, apostles who remain in one location or church for over two days are ‘false prophets’ (*Did.* 11:5). Such short stays suggest that apostleship was not a congregational office in the mind of the *Didache*’s author.

By contrast, prophets could choose to remain in one place. The text also describes prophets as having a similar status, at least in one regard, to high priests: Christians must give the first fruits of ‘every possession’ (e.g. sheep, oxen, wine, honey, oil, money, and clothing)

²⁶ This section does not treat the office of pastor because little evidence exists for such an office in early patristic writings. When the words ποιμήν or ποιμαίνω occur in relation to church polity, they describe the work of, for example, bishops rather than a distinct leadership position (Ign. *Phil.* 2).

²⁷ Michael W. Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, 3rd edn (Baker Academic, 2007), p. 337.

either to prophets or, if a church has no prophets, to the poor (*Did.* 13:3–5). This injunction begins with, ‘But every genuine prophet is worthy of his food. Likewise, every genuine teacher is, like the worker, worthy of his food’ (*Did.* 13:1). This text echoes 1 Timothy, which states, ‘Let the workers who rule well be considered worthy of double honour, especially those who labour in preaching and teaching [...] The labourer deserves to be paid’ (1 Tim 5:17–18).

On the one hand, the *Didache* paints a somewhat opaque and chaotic picture of church polity. The distinction between bishop, deacon, apostle, and prophet is unclear. Each of these positions teaches. Apostles are, at times, labelled prophets. Bishops and deacons, the text states, also ‘carry out for you the ministry of the prophets and teachers’ (*Did.* 15:2). Moreover, the document does not specify how bishops and deacons relate to apostles and prophets from the perspective of church governance. On the other hand, the *Didache* issues a seemingly universal injunction for all churches to appoint bishops and deacons. It does not issue a similar command regarding apostles or prophets. Additionally, echoes exist between the treatment of bishops in the *Didache* and that of bishops and elders in the Pastoral Epistles. Taken as a whole, the text of the *Didache* describes a situation closer to the two-tiered church polity evident in numerous New Testament pericopes than the three-tiered model visible in the second-century writings of Ignatius of Antioch and Polycarp (see below).

Another candidate for the earliest surviving extra-canonical Christian writing is the epistle known as *1 Clement*. Clement, a leader in the early Christian church in Rome, likely wrote the letter to the church in Corinth sometime in the last decade of the first century CE.²⁸ Michael W. Holmes, a New Testament scholar and translator of the Apostolic Fathers, cautions against the traditional identification of Clement as *the* Bishop of Rome. He writes, tradition ‘identifies him as the third bishop of Rome after Peter, but this is unlikely because the office of monarchical bishop, in the sense intended by this later tradition, does not appear to have existed in Rome at this time. Leadership seems to

²⁸ Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers*, pp. 35–36.

have been entrusted to a group of presbyters or bishops.²⁹ The text of *1 Clement* supports Holmes's analysis of Clement's leadership position.

The two-tiered structure of church polity, as seen in several New Testament books, also occurs in *1 Clement* with bishops and deacons. The letter uses ἐπίσκοπος four times. In the first three cases, Clement describes the Apostles appointing bishops alongside deacons (*1 Clem.* 42.4 and 42.5, twice). In this text, both leadership categories consist of multiple individuals serving simultaneously. The other instance of ἐπίσκοπος (*1 Clem.* 59.3) does not relate to ecclesiastical leadership but rather describes God as a 'guardian'. Additionally, Clement uses the cognate ἐπισκοπή twice to denote the office of bishop or bishopric (*1 Clem.* 44.1 and 44.4), which he describes as a perpetual office (*1 Clem.* 44.1). A third occurrence of ἐπισκοπή comes in the statement, 'the kingdom of Christ visits us' (*1 Clem.* 50.3).

1 Clement also contains eight occurrences of the word πρεσβύτερος (elder). The first three of these instances indicate old age (*1 Clem.* 1.3, 3.3, and 21.6), and one usage refers to Jewish leaders during the time of Judith (*1 Clem.* 55.4). The other four uses of πρεσβύτερος signify church leaders (*1 Clem.* 44.4, 47.6, 54.2, and 57.1). In the first example, the text appears to equate πρεσβύτερος (*1 Clem.* 44.4) with ἐπίσκοπος (*1 Clem.* 44.1–3). Another occurrence of πρεσβύτερος comes in the context of Clement condemning the rebellion of certain Christians against church leaders. He addresses such a rebellion several times, describing the church leaders in two different accounts as πρεσβύτερος (*1 Clem.* 47.6) and ἐπίσκοπος (*1 Clem.* 57.1). Additionally, all four pericopes in which Clement employs πρεσβύτερος in the context of church leadership use the word in a plural form.

Therefore, *1 Clement* articulates a two-tiered church leadership structure with pluralities of elders/bishops and pluralities of deacons serving simultaneously (*1 Clem.* 42:4–5). However, the letter could be describing a single congregation with multiple elders/bishops or a context in which multiple Corinthian house churches each had a single

²⁹ Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers*, p. 34.

bishop/elder (or multiple house churches each with multiple bishops/elders). The latter possibility is a federated ecclesiological model in which a group of elders/bishops governs a particular city or region. Yet historians of early Christianity see little evidence of multiple house churches unified into a ‘single socio-political body within a city’ until the third century. As such, the plurality of elders/bishops in Corinth described by Clement likely signifies a group of leaders exercising authority together over a single Corinthian congregation.³⁰

Clement of Rome is also associated with the early Christian document known as *2 Clement*, even though he was likely not its author. The writing, dating to sometime between the late first and mid-second century, is the earliest preserved Christian sermon outside the New Testament.³¹ On the topic of church polity, the author states, ‘And let us think about paying attention and believing not only now, while we are being admonished by the elders (πρεσβύτερος), but let us also remember the Lord’s commands when we have returned home’ (*2 Clem.* 17.3). This admonition supports the pattern of plural teaching eldership in early Christianity.

The *Shepherd of Hermas*, likely written in the second century CE, also contains information about Clement and the early Roman church. While church polity is not a central theme of the writing, it contains several passages with insight into the subject. In one pericope, an older woman, who personifies the church, instructs the author to ‘read [*Shepherd of Hermas*] to this city, along with the elders (πρεσβύτερος) who preside over the church’ (Bk. I, vis. 2, ch. 4 v. 3). A structure in which elders (πρεσβύτερος) ‘preside over’ (προϊστημι) the church recalls several New Testament passages in which προϊστημι describes the activity of ἐπίσκοπος (1 Tim 3:4) and πρεσβύτερος (1 Tim 5:17).

The *Shepherd of Hermas* also employs the term ἐπίσκοπος in two passages and also ἐπίσκοπεω in one of those passages. In the passage

³⁰ Karen Jo Torjesen, ‘Clergy and Laity’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*, ed. by Susan Ashbrook Harvey and David G. Hunter (Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 389–405 (p. 398).

³¹ Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers*, pp. 133–135.

where both forms are present, the church appears as a tower composed of various categories of stones, representing several categories of Christians. White square stones, which fit neatly together, signify the ‘apostles and bishops [ἐπίσκοπος] and teachers and deacons’ (Bk I, vis. 3, ch. 5, v. 1). Notably, the word πρεσβύτερος does not appear in this discussion of church leadership. The term ἐπίσκοπος also occurs in a parable/similitude of the *Shepherd of Hermas* (Bk III, sim. 9, ch. 27). However, this passage says little about the office except that believing bishops (ἐπίσκοπος) are those who act hospitably and serve widows and other persons in need, echoing the description of bishops from the vision addressed above.

In summary, the *Shepherd of Hermas* attests a variety of ecclesiastical leadership roles, including apostle, bishop, teacher, elder, and deacon. It also suggests that a plural body of elders ruled the church. Thus, the *Shepherd of Hermas*, while not offering a clear or detailed picture of ecclesiastical offices, appears to indicate that a monarchical episcopal structure had not yet emerged in the Roman church by the time it was written.

The Mono-Episcopacy

The writings of Ignatius of Antioch and Polycarp of Smyrna, early martyrs of the Christian faith, are essential for the study of early Christian polity. Ignatius (late first/early second century CE) wrote sometime before his martyrdom, which almost certainly occurred during the second half of the reign of the Roman Emperor Trajan (98–117 CE). These texts contain the earliest known unambiguous example of a three-tiered church leadership structure. In his letter to the church in Ephesus, Ignatius writes, ‘For your council of presbyters [πρεσβύτερος], which is worthy of its name and worthy of God, is attuned to the bishop [ἐπίσκοπος] as strings to a lyre’, and ‘Let us, therefore, be careful not to oppose the bishop [ἐπίσκοπος], in order that we may be obedient to God [...] It is obvious, therefore, that we must regard the bishop [ἐπίσκοπος] as the Lord himself’ (Ign. *Eph.* 4.1 and 5.3b–6.1). One of the more startling passages of Ignatius’s church polity occurs in a letter to the church in Smyrna in which he states,

You must all follow the bishop (ἐπίσκοπος) as Jesus Christ followed the Father [...] wherever the bishop appears, there let the congregation be; just as wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the catholic church [...] it is good to acknowledge God and the bishop. The one who honours the bishop has been honoured by God; the one who does anything without the bishop's knowledge serves the devil. (Ign. *Smyrn.* 8.1–9.1)

Ignatius articulates a highly hierarchical, even authoritarian, view of the bishopric throughout the corpus of his writings.³² Two points related to ecclesiastical offices stand out from the writings of Ignatius. First, his use of the Greek words πρεσβύτερος (elder) and ἐπίσκοπος (overseer or bishop) departs from those of Luke, Paul, James, Peter, the *Didache*, and Clement. Second, one church to which Ignatius wrote, Ephesus, is known to have had a two-tiered structure of leadership during the New Testament period. Therefore, at least in this city, an apparent change occurred in the structure of church polity between the New Testament period and the time of Ignatius's letters.

Polycarp of Smyrna (late first to mid-second century CE) like Ignatius, went by the title of 'bishop' (ἐπίσκοπος). In a letter written to Polycarp, Ignatius regards him as the bishop (ἐπίσκοπος) of Smyrna, distinct from the elders (πρεσβύτερος) and deacons. Likewise, *The Martyrdom of Polycarp* describes him as 'bishop of the holy church in Smyrna' (*Mart. Pol.* 16.2). This text uses a singular form of the word ἐπίσκοπος without a definite article. It does not provide clear evidence for singular or plural episcopacy, as anarthrous Greek nouns can be definite or indefinite depending on the immediate linguistic context. However, in the only surviving letter written by Polycarp himself, *Polycarp to the Philippians*, he discusses the offices of elder (πρεσβύτερος) (*Pol. Phil.* 6.1; 11.1–2) and deacon (*Pol. Phil.* 5.2) but does not address the office of bishop (ἐπίσκοπος) at all. At the beginning of that letter, he introduces himself as 'Polycarp and the presbyters with him' (*Pol. Phil.* Intro). This phrase could indicate that Polycarp was either an elder, possibly a *primus inter pares*, or stood apart from the body of elders. Additionally, Polycarp described Ignatius as 'blessed' (*Pol. Phil.* 9.1) and

³² Ign. *Magn.* 3.1, 7.13.2; *Trall.* 2.2, 3.1, 7.2; *Phil.* 1.1, 3.2, 4.1, 7.2; *Smyrn.* 8.1–9.1; *Pol.* Intro., 4.1, 5.2, 6.1.

endorsed his letters to the Philippians for their spiritual edification (Pol. *Phil.* 13.2). Taken together, the evidence related to Polycarp suggests that he was, at the very least, not opposed to mono-episcopal church governance and that he was likely either a singular bishop or the leading elder.

Later Patristic Texts on Church Leadership

Several additional Patristic writings, dating later than those discussed above, shed valuable light on the ecclesiastical leadership structures of the early church. We briefly highlight four such writings from the late second to the fourth centuries CE. In *Against Heresies* (c. 180 CE), Irenaeus, the Bishop of Lugdunum (modern Lyon, France), appears to have used the Greek words ἐπίσκοπος and πρεσβύτερος interchangeably to describe a plural leadership position in the church (Iren. *Haer.* 4.26.5; see also 3.14.2). He also asserts that elders succeeded the apostles (Iren. *Haer.* 4.26.2). The *Apostolic Tradition*, possibly written by Hippolytus of Rome in the early third century CE, purports to offer a detailed account of the ecclesiastical practices of the Roman church. The writing describes an ecclesiastical structure consisting of one bishop with authority over a council of elders and a group of deacons. Additionally, the *Apostolic Tradition's* description of the process for ordaining a new bishop suggests that a degree of federation existed across churches. Bishops, but not elders, from other locations were to lay their hands on the new bishop (*Apost. Trad.* 2:1–5). Another likely third-century text, the *Didascalia Apostolorum* or ‘Teaching of the Apostles’, modelled on the *Didache*, articulates a four-part church governance structure consisting of one bishop with pluralities of elders (also called teachers), deacons, and subdeacons. At times, the text describes the bishop as something approaching a *primus inter pares* among the elders (e.g. *Didasc.* ch. IV).³³ Additionally, as in the *Apostolic Tradition*, the instructions for ordaining a bishop in the *Didascalia Apostolorum* include a noteworthy element of federation: bishops from nearby churches lay hands on the new bishop (*Didasc.* ch. III).

³³ The *Didascalia Apostolorum* also uses the term ‘pastor’ or ‘shepherd’ to describe bishops (*Didasc.* chs. III, IV; see also X) and possibly also to describe elders (*Didasc.* ch. XV; see also X).

Unity as the Motive for the Emergence of Mono-Episcopal Governance?

The motivation for the shift from plural to mono-episcopal leadership in early Christian churches is a crucial question. Though any answer must be tentative and incomplete, evidence suggests that the drive for unity in the face of threats to the institutional church played a significant role. Consolidation and centralisation of authority likely arose from a concern that division, especially in the context of heresy, would weaken the church.³⁴

Ignatius, the strongest early advocate of mono-episcopal governance, exhibited deep anxiety regarding division within the church. His *Letter to the Ephesians* enjoins readers to pursue harmony and unity while also advocating obedience to the bishop as if to Christ. This epistle articulates a cascading chain of harmony from the mind of God to the mind of Christ, to the mind of the bishop, and to the minds of Christians under the bishop's authority. Ignatius also invoked harmony in a passage including elders or presbyters, when he wrote,

Thus it is proper for you to run together in harmony with the mind of the bishop, as you are in fact doing. For your council of presbyters, which is worthy of its name and worthy of God, is attuned to the bishop as strings to a lyre. Therefore, in your unanimity and harmonious love Jesus Christ is sung.³⁵

The inference seems to be that a presbytery worthy of God should align fully with its bishop. Shortly thereafter, the *Epistle to the Ephesians* links obedience to the bishop with maintaining order and avoiding heresy. In that passage, Ignatius declared that Christians must regard bishops as they would the Lord himself.³⁶ Heretical doctrine is also a theme in his

³⁴ In addition, the Roman Empire, in certain times and places, exerted immense pressure on early Christians that had numerous effects on the church, likely including consolidation of authority. Ignatius of Antioch experienced Roman tyranny in the extreme, being executed for his Christian faith in the first decade of the second century CE. Pliny the Younger, also during the reign of Trajan, famously wrote a letter to the emperor contemplating a variety of questions and punishments for Christians.

³⁵ Ign. *Eph.* 4:1. Similarly, Ignatius's *Letter to the Magnesians* (6:1–2, 7:1) links the unity of the Father and Son with the unity in the church amongst the bishop, presbyters, and deacons.

³⁶ Ign. *Eph.* 6:1–2.

Letter to the Romans, where Ignatius urged unity at the eucharistic table, presided over by the bishop, in the face of schismatics.³⁷

Later in the second century, Irenaeus also linked the struggle against heresies, the title of his most famous writing, to ecclesiastical structure. He rejected the Gnostic idea of secret knowledge, as well as the related teaching that the true God is neither the God of the Hebrew Scriptures nor the creator of the material cosmos. Irenaeus's argument against Gnosticism appealed to apostolic succession via a mono-episcopal structure. The church in Rome, preeminent in authority according to him, gained its status through association with its founders, the apostles Peter and Paul. The subsequent purportedly unbroken line of singular bishops (from Linus to Anacletus to Clement, and so on to Eleutherius, the twelfth Bishop of Rome in succession, who was leading the church when Irenaeus wrote *Against Heresies*), authoritative heirs of the testimony and teachings of the apostles, refuted key Gnostic doctrines in their public teachings. For example, Irenaeus specifically referred to *1 Clement*, Clement's letter to the Corinthian church, which contradicts Gnostic conceptions of God.³⁸ That the letter of a singular and authoritative bishop of the Roman church opposed ideas linked to Gnostic heresies was robust evidence for Irenaeus.

Finally, a text from Jerome of Stridon, author of the *Biblia Sacra Vulgata*, further supports several arguments of this article. His *Commentary on the Epistle of Titus* states,

Hence a presbyter is the same as a bishop, and before ambition came into religion, by the prompting of the devil, and people began to say: 'I belong to Paul; I to Apollo; I to Cephass', the churches were governed by the direction of presbyters, acting as a body. But when each presbyter began to suppose that those whom he had baptized belonged to him, rather than to Christ, it was decreed in the whole Church that one of the presbyters should be chosen to preside over the others, and that the whole responsibility for the Church should devolve on him, so that the seeds of schism should be removed.³⁹

³⁷ Ign. *Rom.* 3:2–3.

³⁸ Iren. *Haer.* 3.3.

³⁹ *The Later Christian Fathers: A Selection from the Writings of the Fathers from St. Cyril of Jerusalem to St. Leo the Great*, trans. by Henry Bettenson (Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 189.

Though written in the late fourth century CE, this historical sketch aligns with significant evidence from early Christian texts, discussed above, for the emergence of mono-episcopal church governance from a plural presbytery/episcopate. Additionally, in this passage, Jerome directly linked the rise of mono-episcopacy to the goal of preventing ecclesiastical schism.

Conclusion

Several essential features of church polity emerge from our review of New Testament and early patristic writings. First, a distinction between the offices of elder and bishop is not visible in the New Testament. The mono-episcopacy, with a sharp delineation between these two positions, first comes to light in the life of Ignatius of Antioch. Additionally, elders/bishops, rather than ‘pastors’ occupying a separate office, pastored or shepherded God’s people. On that note, little evidence exists for the office of pastor or shepherd in the first several centuries of the church. Fourth, a prevailing organisational pattern of early Christianity was the practice of shared leadership. Church polity often entailed a group of people, described as bishops and elders, leading a congregation simultaneously. Alternatively, leaders of congregations may have operated together in loose-knit federations. Perhaps, both shared governance practices existed in much of Christendom in the first several centuries.

These early patterns of church polity provide guidance and encouragement in the face of common weaknesses in contemporary ecclesiology. The plural leadership model raises doubts about paradigms in which singular, at times ego-centric, and at times overburdened pastors or priests dominate congregations. Yet the message of this article is not to view a particular ecclesiological structure as the only theologically defensible position (multiple models existed even in the New Testament era), or as the solution to all the leadership challenges of contemporary congregational life. Instead, we argue that shared leadership was a prominent feature in the New Testament and the early Christian church. As such, mutuality and accountability among Christian leaders are essential. This point also resonates with New Testament

teaching on mutual encouragement (Rom 1:12) and mutual submission (Eph 5:21). Lastly, the plural or shared leadership model reminds us of Dunn's exhortation, cited above, that the mission and service of the church is not 'the special ministry of a few', but the joy and responsibility of all followers of Christ.