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Historical Background

HISTORIANS HAVE DEBATED THE original order of the church for centuries, but none question that it developed significantly during its first six hundred years. By the time of the division of Christendom into East and West, church order was well established, including a separate class of clergy (priests), various orders of ministry, regional bishops, councils, and (at least in the West) a pope.[1] During the Middle Ages, church order became more complex and sophisticated.[2] The Pseudo-Dionysian writings exercised a profound influence upon the development of church hierarchy.[3] These writings claimed to be the ideas of Paul the apostle, given to Dionysius of Athens (Acts 17), who wrote them. Pseudo-Dionysius taught that all spiritual beings belong to an order of hierarchy. Earthly beings reflect the order of the heavenly (which includes nine orders). The heavenly order mediates from God to man. Thus various levels of ministry are delineated in the church on the basis of the

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1. By 300 CE bishops had become regional, spiritual rulers whose authority was unquestioned. By 400 CE the clergy had become a separate, isolated class in society. Hatch, *Organization of Early Christian Churches*, 82–163.

2. "The early Middle Ages in the West produced novel shifts in the emphasis and practice, among which we may notice the development of diocesan episcopacy as we know it today, involving the separation from the sacrament of initiation of the rite of confirmation as the sole prerogative of the bishop; the extension of authority and importance to archpresbyters or deans, to presbyter-abbots, and not least to archdeacons." Shepherd, "The Development of Early Ministry," 136.

3. *ODCC,* s.v. "Dionysius, the Pseudo-Areopagite," 406–7. Historically, these writings were first cited by Severus, Patriarch of Antioch (513 CE). Some Roman Catholic scholars began to question their authenticity at the time of the Reformation. That they were actually written ca. 500 CE has been well established since 1900.

heavenly hierarchy. In fact, the word *hierarchy* entered the language of the West through Dionysius.[4]

Challenges to the Catholic Position on Church Order

During the late Middle Ages, men such as Arnaldo de Brescia, Jean de Paris, Marsiglio de Padua and John Wyclif raised their voices against the existing (Roman Catholic) church hierarchy.[5] Marsiglio de Padua argued that the authority to discipline heretics lies in the hands of the people and that bishops, in the New Testament sense, are local presbyters.[6] He likewise argued that the pope was neither the successor of Peter nor rightly had authority over any other bishop.[7] Independent of Marsiglio, Wyclif found only two offices for the church in the New Testament: presbyters and deacons.[8] He

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4. *Hierarchy* is, in fact, "an authentically Dionisian term" (Luscombe, "Wyclif and Hierarchy," 234).

5. "What [Wyclif] set in motion was the abiding suspicion that the order of God's doings was not identical with the order of the church's doings." Burtchaell, *From Synagogue to Church*, 10.

6. Marsilius of Padua, *Defensor Pacis*, 140–51, 233–41. Marsiglio based his arguments about bishops and elders, in part, on the writings of Jerome on the same subject.

7. Ibid., 241–53. For a summary of his writings, see Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 6:72–77.

8. Since Marsiglio de Padua's *Defensor Pacis* appeared in 1326 and Wyclif's *De Officio Regis* in 1379. There has been much debate about whether Wyclif was indebted to de Padua. After extensive research, no connection can be established. Lahey, *Philosophy and Politics of Wyclif*, 66–67, says, "On the face of it, Marsilius and Wyclif appear remarkably similar. But these similarities are illusory. As has been mentioned, Marsilius advocated rule in accord with the will of the people, arguing that God used human wills as the medium through which He establishes government. The idea that God would make use of any sort of mediate cause to effect His will is foreign to Wyclif's philosophy. . . . Both hold that Scripture alone is the true authority in ecclesiastical disputes, and use this position to argue against the papal monarchy. But Marsilius believes that correct scriptural interpretation is only possible when made by priests and educated laity in council, contributing to a conciliarist theory that was to be influential in the coming centuries. Wyclif, on the other hand, was to argue that Grace alone is needed to ensure true interpretation of Scriptures; Wycliffite *Sola Scriptura* theology was the first ideology to be condemned when the conciliarists began their work at Constance."

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concluded that the papacy and gradations of bishops were unscriptural.[9] Wyclif also asserted that the clergy should be elected by congregations.[10]

With the outbreak of the Reformation, the debate about polity became widespread and intense. The Reformers claimed that they were returning to the New Testament church order. Calvin, for instance, in his *Institutes,* draws conclusions about church order very similar to those of Wyclif.[11] However, as the Reformers were forced to make agreements with the local or regional governments to retain authority, Reformed church order took on a form which harmonized with the demands of local or regional government.[12] Burtchaell summarizes the development in this manner:

> The ideal scheme of congregational sovereignty and of a single, unranked ministry did not long endure. Supervisory needs prompted the creation of various hierarchies which, however differently from traditional episcopacy they were explained, in form and function resembled nothing so much as a reformed order of bishops. Congregational say-so often subsided to a perfunctory endorsement of the judgments of the clerical professionals. The aspiration to be free of prelates who acted like lay lords was not furthered when the new movement had recourse to the lay lords themselves as patrons, and when these patrons established themselves as dominant in the synods and consistories, and occasionally as the recognized authorities of last resort over the churches.[13]

The radical Reformers, principally the Anabaptists, rejected the union of church and state, and thus were an exception to this phenomenon of constriction as they developed their own views of church government.[14]

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9. "If they had been necessary to the church, Christ and his apostles would not have held their peace about them." Vaughan, ed., *Tracts and Treatises,* 45.

10. Lechler, ed. *Johannes de Wiclif Tractatus de Officio Pastorali*, 39–40.

11. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.3.4–12.

12. MacKinnon, *Calvin and the Reformation*, 81–82; Grimm, *The Reformation Era*, 183–84.

13. Burtchaell, *From Synagogue to Church*, 36.

14. See, for instance, Verduin, *The Reformers and their Stepchildren*, 23–62; Lumpkin, "The Schleitheim Confession," 22–30. See also Lumpkin, "The Waterland Confession," 41–65. Lumpkin does not denote the Schleitheim or Waterland confessions as Baptist confessions but as forerunners of Baptist confessions. Mennonites consider the Waterland Confession the earliest of Mennonite confessions; see the Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online, s.v. "Confession of Faith." Some theological writers persist, wrongly, in identifying all Anabaptists as enthusiasts, like Thomas Müntzer. See, for instance, Küng, *The Church*, 194–95.

During the English Reformation, the Independents asserted a form of government which they claimed was based on the New Testament. They rejected the appointment of clergy, both by the state and by regional bishops; in fact, they defined bishops as local pastors, to be elected by the congregation. They further viewed themselves as small, local, democratically functioning bodies.[15] But the development of non-Catholic church government was not yet complete. In the nineteenth century, the Plymouth Brethren movement developed still another form of polity, represented by John Nelson Darby and George Mueller, which rejected the democratic concept.[16]

The Protestant Consensus

In the middle of the nineteenth century, the church order debate was taken up as an academic one across denominational lines. Using historical research, theologians argued that the original church order of the New Testament was simpler and more democratic than its later developments; bishops and presbyters were the same and purely local officers.[17] All these writers, with varying views of how the later forms of church order developed, agree that the primitive church was a democracy which later degenerated into a monarchy.

An additional concept was added by theologians like Karl von Weizsäcker, Adolf von Harnack, and Rudolf Sohm, who saw a change of order within the New Testament church itself from charismatic leaders (e.g., the gifts mentioned in 1 Cor 12) to local, established leaders (bishops, presbyters, deacons).[18] Weizsäcker stated that the Pauline churches were clearly

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15. See the 1596 statement, "A Brief Summe," in Carlson, ed., *Writings of Henry Barrow,* 3:118–50. Barrow believed that there was a specific kind of church government laid down by Christ and that it was to be distinguished from the civil government. Note also "The Savoy Declaration," a confession written in 1658, in Schaff, ed., *Creeds of Christendom*, 3:707–29.

16. Kelly, a prominent writer for the early Brethren movement, offers a good explanation of the Brethren position on church order and its differences from other views in his book, *The Church of God*.

17. Rothe, *Der Anfänge der Kirche*; Neander, *Geschichte der Pflanzung und Leitung*; Ritschl, *Die Entstehung der altkatholischen Kirche*; Lightfoot, *Epistle to the Philippians,* 181–269; Hatch, *Organization of the Early Christian Churches*; Hort, *The Christian Ecclesia.*

18. Weizsäcker, *Das apostolische Zeitalter*; Harnack, *Die Lehre der Zwölf Apostel*; Sohm, *Kirchenrecht.*

each ruled by their own self-governance and that all the churches (not just Pauline) elected their own officers and representatives. He was convinced that the first converts in the early churches became their first leaders; an office of bishop or deacon did not become fixed until after the death of the apostles.[19] Sohm, in particular, saw a conflict between the concepts of charismatic leaders and established, designated leaders in the New Testament; the organization of churches with established leaders was a result of man's sinfulness and a return to the Law.[20] Harnack denoted the government of the churches outside of Judea as "pneumatic democracies"; the Judean churches, by contrast, were dominated by the leadership of James and thus had the beginnings of an episcopal system.[21] By the end of the nineteenth century, the academic debate had developed into a consensus that the original church order had been simple, democratic, and local (with a majority of scholars seeing leadership as charismatic rather than fixed).

CHALLENGES TO THE PROTESTANT CONSENSUS

This consensus was challenged by Heinrich Holtzmann, Henry B. Swete's symposium in 1918, Karl Götz, B. H. Streeter, and Olaf Linton.[22] They saw church order developments as arising from varying types of order already present, from deliberative councils already present, or from prophecy in the church of the New Testament. J. Scott Horrell is a recent theologian who follows the view of B. H.Streeter.[23]

Other challenges to the Protestant Consensus came from Anglican theologians, such as Charles Gore and the Kenneth Kirk symposium.[24] These asserted the Anglican model as the true biblical concept. More recently, another Anglican, Roger Beckwith, has also presented Anglican order as biblical. He bases his assertions on the idea that early church elders

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19. Weizsäcker, *Das apostolische Zeitalter*, 622–23, 630–41.

20. Sohm, *Kirchenrecht*, 28.

21. Harnack, *Kirchenverfassung und Kirchenrecht*, 34–40.

22. Holtzmann, *Lehrbuch der neutestamentlichen Theologie*; Swete, ed., *Essays*; Goetz, *Petrus als Grunder und Oberhaupt*; Streeter, *The Primitive Church*; Linton, *Das Problem der Urkirche*.

23. Horrell, *From the Ground Up*, 54–55. Horrell gives scant historic evidence for his view, but uses it in presenting what he feels is the right way to approach church order.

24. Gore, *The Church and the Ministry*, which was originally written in 1886 but caught the attention of theologians in its 1936 edition; Kirk, ed., *The Apostolic Ministry*.

were a continuation of the Jewish teaching elder, who appointed his own disciples; later, at the end of the first century CE, elders agreed on elevating one elder to the single bishop position.[25] Peter Toon is another theologian who presents the Anglican order as the right Christian order, but does not base his arguments on the New Testament.[26]

The Protestant Consensus Reasserted

Beginning in the middle of the twentieth century, the "Protestant Consensus" was reasserted by Edward Schweizer, Rudolf Bultmann, and Hans von Campenhausen.[27] Schweizer regarded the pastoral epistles as non-Pauline and undoing what Paul had achieved. He saw no structures in the Pauline churches. Bultmann argued that Sohm was incorrect to describe organization and charisma in the early church as being at odds with each other. He said that Paul organized each church as something of a "congregational democracy" ("Gemeinde-Demokratie").

Campenhausen challenged the idea that the settled officers and charismatics were two competing groups. At the same time, he recognized the three major modern church polities as beginning their development in the New Testament. Schweizer and Campenhausen, according to Burtchaell, have become established as the last best statements of Protestant theology's consensus.[28]

Modern Roman Catholic Debate

Roman Catholic theologians Hans Küng and Edward Schillebeeckx argue that the hierarchical form of church leadership, as presently found in the

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25. Beckwith, *Elders in Every City*. Beckwith cogently argues, "It is therefore reasonable to ask whether the basic assumption underlying the liberal reconstruction of primitive Christianity, namely, that the free exercise of spiritual gifts and formal structures cannot co-exist but are mutually exclusive, is not a simplistic mistake? May it not rather be the case that the exercise of varieties of gifts by Christians in general, what is often called 'every-member ministry,' *demands* formal structures to be fruitful?" 17.

26. Toon, "Episcopalianism," 19–48.

27. Schweizer, *Gemeinde und Gemeindeordnung*; Bultmann, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments*; Campenhausen, *Kirchliches Amt*.

28. Burtchaell, *From Synagogue to Church*, 137.

Catholic Church, does not square with the New Testament where there is no division between clergy and laity.[29] Küng notes,

> The word λαός in the New Testament, as also in the Old Testament, indicates no distinction *within* the community as between priests ("clerics") and people ("laity"). It indicates rather the fellowship of all in a single community. The distinction it implies is one *outside* the community, between the whole people of God and the "non-people," the world, "the heathens." Not until the third century do we find any distinction between "clerics" and "laymen."[30]

Küng also feels that the Catholic Church has set too much weight on the pastoral epistles for its view of church order.[31] Schillebeeckx argues that the assertion of a divinely-willed hierarchical structure in the Catholic Church is an historical misunderstanding and "one of the most painful points of dispute between Catholic faithful and their leaders in our democratic age."[32] Schillebeeckx states that the Church's hierarchical structure was inspired by Neoplatonism and "no longer has anything to do with the nature of the church."[33] As a Feminist scholar within the Catholic Church, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza asserts that the one ideal model for the Church is Jesus and his egalitarian community.[34]

Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI) argues for the opposing position. While allowing for democratic activity on a local level, he states that democracy has no place in the higher leadership of the church. He bases his assertion on the following concepts: the ordination of priests (completely exempt from democratic decisions); the separation of charisma from

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29. Küng, *Die Kirche*; Schillebeeckx, *Church.*

30. Küng, *The Church,* 125–26. In this second aspect, he follows the ideas of the Protestant Consensus. One must be careful not to conclude that Küng believes that the writings of the NT establish the final model for the organization of the church. He states, "The New Testament Church is not a model which we can follow slavishly without any regard to the lapse of time and our constantly changing situation. . . . If the Church wants to remain true to its nature, it cannot simply preserve its past. As an historical Church it must be prepared to change in order to fulfill its essential mission in a world which is constantly changing, which always lives in the present, not in the past," ibid., 24.

31. Ibid., 179–81.

32. Schillebeeckx, *Church*, 188.

33. Ibid., 217.

34. Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*.

democracy; and the historical precedent of decision-making by apostolic councils (rather than the people).[35]

Social Analysis

Social analysis has been added to the church order discussion through the works of Gerd Theissen, Bengt Holmberg, Wayne Meeks, Andrew Clarke, and others.[36] They assert that Paul's statements do not prescribe a church order but rather advise how to correct errors in church order. In addition, Max Weber's *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* has significantly influenced the social analysis of the early church.[37]

Other Recent Developments

More recent developments in the church order debate have, to some extent, reasserted old themes. James Tunstead Burtchaell asserts that the Church took its order directly from the synagogue.[38] Alexander Strauch and Gene Getz—whose books, while not written for an academic audience, are nevertheless exegetical—have emphasized the New Testament pattern of local church elders (essentially the brethren concept).[39] R. Alastair Campbell sees bishops as leaders chosen from the ranks of natural leaders (in his view, elders are not an office) within the setting of the house church. As house churches multiplied in cities, the bishop became the main leader over all the house churches in a city.[40] Benjamin Merkle, while paying careful attention to the context of the social world of the New Testament, concludes that elders and bishops are the same and normally function in plurality in a local church.[41]

From the works of the pre-Reformation voices, like Marsiglio de Padua and Wyclif to this latest treatise by Merkle, the circle of research on

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35. Ratzinger and Maier, *Demokratie in der Kirche*, 23–34.

36. Theissen, *Soziologie des Urchristentums*; Holmberg, *Paul and Power*; Meeks, *The First Urban Christians*; Clarke, *Serve the Community*.

37. Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft;* see esp. 379–490.

38. Burtchaell, *From Synagogue to Church*.

39. Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*; Getz, *Elders and Leaders*.

40. Campbell, *The Elders*.

41. Merkle, *Elder and Overseer*.

church order is nearly complete. The arguments throughout the centuries point towards a self-governing church order on the local level, limited to only two officers (with a variety of scenarios and interpretations offered in the process). What is lacking in the scholarly discussion is a renewed look at corporate decision-making in the church of the New Testament, a gap this study intends to fill.

SAMPLE