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The Rise of Clericalism

in Early Christianity

Introduction

In this article we will study the question of how and when the clergy arose among the early Christians and on what Scriptural basis. This will be preceded by a survey of New Testament data so that we can observe how the Lord Jesus Christ intended to direct the universal assembly and the local assemblies. Do we find in the New Testament something like clergy or clergymen ruling the laity? Did the apostles ordain some system of succession or did they give completely different instructions for the future?

The New Testament assembly

It is important to see that the first time the assembly is mentioned it is called by the Lord His own assembly: *My assembly* (Matthew 16:18). Later on, after His glorification, He identified Himself totally with it when presenting Himself to Saul as *'Jesus, whom you are persecuting'* (Acts 9:5), although Saul intended to persecute the Christians, not the Christ. The expression *'the assembly of Christ'*

does not occur in Scripture, although in Romans 16:16 Paul speaks in the plural of all 'the assemblies of Christ'. The most frequently used designation is 'the assembly of God' (Acts 20:28; 1 Corinthians 1:2; 1 Corinthians 10:32; 1 Corinthians 11:22; 1 Corinthians 15:9; 1 Timothy 3:5, 15; and twice in the plural: 1 Corinthians 11:16; 2 Thessalonians 1:4). Our conclusion must be that the assembly is not presented to us as an independent and self-supporting company. Divine Persons claim it as their property and this will have very practical consequences!

The relationship between Christ or God and the assembly is illustrated by three well-known figures in Paul's epistles:

- a) the assembly seen as the Bride of Christ (Ephesians 5);
- b) the assembly seen as the Body of Christ (Ephesians 1 and 4; Colossians 1; 1 Corinthians 10 and 12);
- c) the assembly seen as the House of God (Ephesians 2; 1 Corinthians 3; 2 Corinthians 6; 1 Timothy 3; 2 Timothy 2).

For our subject the figures b and c are particularly important, because they instruct us about the divine guidance and authority given from above in respect of the assembly while still on earth. We will study therefore the gifts, given for the growth and health of the Body, and the offices, instituted for the order of the House. It is necessary to distinguish carefully between gifts and offices.

Gifts can indicate the persons themselves, or the spiritual qualifications of the persons. In Ephesians 4:10-11 we find apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds and teachers, given by the glorified Lord 'with a view to the edifying of the body of Christ'. The Body is universal and so are the gifts. In 1 Corinthians 12:28-31 we have as persons apostles, prophets, teachers all given or 'set' by God, and as qualifications miraculous powers, gifts of healings, helps, governments, kinds of tongues (compare Romans 12:6-8). Paul, for example, was a 'teacher of the nations' (2 Timothy 1:11), and he could say: 'according as I teach everywhere in every assembly' (1 Corinthians 4:17).

As to offices we find persons ordained to be elders (Gr *presbuteroi*), or overseers (Gr. *episkopoi*). It is interesting to see that these are designations of persons having one and the same office. In Acts 20:17 Paul calls for the elders of the assembly at Ephesus, but when they had come to him at Miletus he addresses them in verse 28 as 'overseers' and exhorts them moreover to take heed to themselves and to all the flock wherein, he says, 'the Holy Spirit has set you as overseers, to shepherd the assembly of God, which He has purchased with the blood of His own'.

This passage is very instructive. We can conclude that God 'set' the gifts in the Body of Christ and that the Holy Spirit 'set' officers in the assembly of God. The elders or overseers were in, not above the assembly; they had a special responsibility to shepherd not their own, but God's assembly. This has nothing to do with ordination; the word 'to set' (Gr. *titheemi* and sometimes *tithenai*) points more to charging a certain service or activity to a person than to ordaining him in an official office (cf. the disciples, John 15:16; Paul, 1 Timothy 1:12; 2 Timothy 1:11; Christ, Hebrews 1:2). That the elders in Ephesus had actually been ordained by Timothy as the delegate of the apostle Paul, we may conclude from 1 Timothy 3:2; 1 Timothy 5:17.

We find assemblies then in which the elders had been ordained by the apostles or by their delegates, but never by the assemblies themselves. In Acts 14:23 we read that Paul and Barnabas (also an apostle, Acts 14:4 and 14) chose elders for the believers in each assembly, i.e. in Derbe, Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch. Titus also had to establish elders in each city in Crete, as Paul ordered him (Titus 1:5).

Our conclusion must be that the activity of the elders in Scripture is restricted to the local assemblies and that their ordination presupposes the authority of the apostles or their delegates. We do not find any activity of the assemblies in this matter, which illustrates the divine principle that authority comes from above.

There seems to have been one exception to this rule that the assemblies had no influence in matters of ordination: the deacons. In Acts 6 the local assembly chose the seven men, but they set them before the apostles who established them over this business and laid their hands on them (verse 37). Concerning the role of the assembly, we can only speak of influence, not of ordination. In 2 Corinthians 8:19 we find a brother chosen by the assemblies as the fellow-traveller of Paul to bring money to the saints in Jerusalem; but this had nothing to do with an official ordination. The assemblies had given the money, and therefore they were allowed to choose someone they trusted to bring their gift to Jerusalem.

Apostolic succession?

In the New Testament we have seen the following principle: no ordination without the apostles or their delegates. What should happen then in the time when the apostles would no longer be here on earth? Do the Scriptures contain a procedure to choose or to ordain new apostles?

It will be clear that this is not the case. God Himself was the Giver of the apostles, whose main characteristic was that they had seen the risen Christ (1 Corinthians 9:1), and whose service was connected with signs and wonders and works of power (2 Corinthians 12:12). They had laid, together with the New Testament prophets, the foundation (Ephesians 2:20); and in their teaching the saints persevered (Acts 2:42). For the future the assemblies were not to be dependent on successors of the apostles. The apostles themselves pointed another way: the resources of the Word of God. When Paul left the elders of Ephesus he committed them to God and to the Word of His grace, and not to a new apostle (Acts 20:32). Peter did the same: the believers should, after his departure, 'call to mind these things' (2 Peter 1:15). With an eye on a dark future he tells them 'to be mindful to the words spoken before by the holy prophets, and of the commandment of the Lord and Saviour by your apostles' (2 Peter 3:2). Also John said similar things: 'As for you let that which ye have heard from the beginning abide in you' (1 John 2:24).

After the apostles: the second century

It is striking that the situation we find later completely differs from what we would expect on the basis of the preceding lines. The saints did not look for a Scriptural foundation for the actual organisation of the church; the New Testament seems to have had no practical authority in this respect. Neither did anyone understand that the way things were rapidly changing could not stand the test of God's Word.

In the middle of the second century a substantially uniform pattern of local ministry developed throughout the Christian world. In each city the Christians followed one principal leader and pastor, called the bishop (Gr. episkopos, the 'overseer'). He worked together with some colleagues, the elders or presbyters (Gr. presbuteroi) and was assisted by several deacons (Gr. diakonoi) who served him in his administrative and pastoral functions. It is not easy to explain how this could happen. Let us look at some contemporary documents.

The letter of Clement of Rome to the Corinthians

In AD 96 the Corinthians received a letter, commonly called '1 Clement', which shows how soon the path of the New Testament writers was abandoned. There were troubles in the church at Corinth about the bishop's office, which necessitated

that the bishop of Rome, Clement, should send a letter about the matter to the Corinthians. In chapter 42 and 44 he writes (translation Lightfoot):

Chapter 42 - So preaching everywhere in country and town, they (= the apostles, GHK) appointed their firstfruits, when they had proved them by the Spirit, to be bishops and deacons unto them that should believe. And this they did in no new fashion: for indeed it had been written concerning bishops and deacons from very ancient times; for thus saith the scripture in a certain place, 'I will appoint their bishops in righteousness and their deacons in faith' ¹ (...).

Chapter 44 - And our Apostles knew through our Lord Jesus Christ that there would be strife over the name of the bishop's office. For this cause therefore, having received complete foreknowledge, they appointed the aforesaid persons ², and afterwards they provided a continuance, that if these should fall asleep, other approved men should succeed to their ministration. Those therefore who were appointed by them, or afterwards by other men of repute with the consent of the whole church, and have ministered blamelessly to the flock of Christ in lowliness of mind, peacefully and with all modesty, and for a long time have borne a good report with all these men we consider to be unjustly thrust out from their ministration. For it will be no light sin for us, if we thrust out those who have offered the gifts of the bishop's office blamelessly and holily. Blessed are those presbyters who have gone before, seeing that their departure was fruitful and ripe: for they have no fear lest anyone should remove them from their appointed place. For we see that ye have displaced certain persons, though they were living honourably, from the ministration which they had respected blamelessly.

Here already we find three characteristics of the post-apostolic church:

1. The application of Old Testament prophecies to the church; there was a failure to see the difference between Israel and the church;
2. The idea that the apostles themselves instituted the system of apostolic succession;
3. The idea of influence ('consent') of the whole church concerning the appointment of bishops.

It is interesting that Clement still knew of only two offices, i.e. those of bishops and of deacons. In his letter presbyter and bishop are still used as interchangeable

¹ Inaccurate quotation from Isaiah 60:17: LXX, GHK.

² The bishops and deacons of chapter 42, GHK.

words for the same office. Compare for this twofold structure of offices, bishop and deacon, Philippians 1: 1.

The ‘didakee’ (= teaching) of the twelve apostles

This is dating from the beginning of the second century, and contains some practical instructions ‘for the Gentiles’, i.e. the Gentile churches. Here too we find, as in 1 Clement, the twofold structure of office. In chapter 15, 12 the author writes as follows: *Ye should choose therefore for yourselves bishops and deacons, worthy of the Lord, meek men, not fond of money, true and proved; because they also serve you in the service of prophets and teachers. So do not overlook them, for they are your honoured ones together with the prophets and teachers*³.

Again we see the idea of an apostolic succession: the bishops are chosen or appointed by the church, together with the deacons (cf. 1 Timothy 3). The author also fails to see the difference between gifts and offices. He speaks about bishops and deacons (officers, functioning locally) serving as prophets and teachers (gifts, operating universally), although there also seems to have been a more specific group of prophets and teachers working separately.

The letters of Ignatius of Antioch

The letters of Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, are interesting documents. During a persecution in his city he was sentenced to death. This sentence would have been carried out in Rome in the year AD 110, when the persecution itself had already passed. He had to travel from Antioch to Rome and during this trip he passed through Asia Minor and visited the churches in Philadelphia, Sardis and Smyrna. In Smyrna moreover he had an interview with delegates from the churches of Ephesus, Magnesia and Tralles and wrote letters to these churches and to the church of Rome. When he came to Troas, in the north of Macedonia, he also sent letters to the churches in Philadelphia and Smyrna, and to Polycarpus, bishop of Smyrna.

When we compare his letters we see that things were changing in a certain direction. He presupposes a threefold structure of office: one bishop at the head of a local church, and several elders and deacons. This ministerial structure came to

³ Translation GHK.

prevail in all the churches in the second century. There was a natural evolution of the twofold into the threefold structure of office, because Ignatius did not condemn the twofold structure *expressis verbis*. As a kind of foundation of the new situation, he pointed to the essential unity of the church. He wrote to the Philadelphians in chapter 4⁴: *Be ye careful therefore to observe one eucharist, for there is one flesh of our Lord Jesus Christ and one cup unto union in His blood, there is one altar, as there is one bishop, together with the presbytery and the deacons....*

Compare also chapter 7:

I cried out, when I was among you; I spoke with a loud voice, with God's own voice. Give ye heed to the bishop and the presbytery and deacons. Howbeit there were those who suspected me of saying this, because I knew beforehand of the division of certain persons. But He in whom I am bound is my witness that I learned it not from flesh or man; it was the preaching of the Spirit who spoke on this wise: Do nothing without the bishop; keep your flesh as a temple of God, cherish union; shun divisions; be imitators of Jesus Christ, as He Himself also was of His Father.

Mind that Ignatius speaks of the Spirit as his source, not the Scriptures! The stressed supremacy of the bishop is remarkable, whom he seems to compare with God Himself, as we also find elsewhere in his letters: *the bishop must be seen as God Himself, as presiding after the likeness of God, and the presbyters after the likeness of the council of the Apostles* (to the Magnesians, chapter 6). Ignatius describes him as the central figure of church life in his letter to those at Smyrna, chapter 8:

Let no man do aught of things pertaining to the church apart from the bishop. Let that be held a valid eucharist which is under the bishop or one to whom he shall have committed it. Wheresoever the bishop shall appear, there let the people be; even as where Jesus may be, there is the universal church. It is not lawful apart from the bishop either to baptize or to hold a lovefeast; but whatsoever he shall approve, this is well pleasing also to God; that everything which ye do may be sure and valid.

The bishop seems also to have played a role when people got married; in his letter to Polycarp he writes in chapter 5: *It becomes men and women, when they marry, to unite themselves with the consent of the bishop, that the marriage may be after the Lord and not after concupiscence.*

⁴ Translation Lightfoot.

One can define the role of the bishop more and more as an intermediary, at the cost of the activity and spontaneity of the members of the flock. It is impossible to quote all the passages in the letters of Ignatius where he underlines the necessity to obey the bishop in everything and to honour him. In the abundance of these exhortations we may see an indication that the supremacy of the bishops over the local churches was by no means generally accepted. Nevertheless people got used to the existence of the growing class of 'specialists' in the churches and to the authority executed by them.

Hence in the second century we see the rise of what is generally called the clergy. This word is derived from the Greek word *kleeros*, the plural of which we find in 1 Peter 5:3: '(2) shepherd the flock of God which is among you, exercising oversight, not by necessity, but willingly; not for base gain, but readily; (3) not as lording it over your possessions (= *kleroi*), but being models for the flock'. These '*kleroi*' are here the elect body, or rather bodies, seen as God's heritage, in contrast to those who had spiritual oversight over them. It is thus very striking that Scripture uses this word in a context that explicitly warns against assuming a place in which the ministers have put themselves. The present use of the word 'clergy' points to the substitution of ministers in the place of the church of God. In Scripture the use of the word 'clergy' is applied to what men have called the laity. That is God's Clergy!

The third century

We have seen that the rise of the clergy took place in the second century. In the third century the church and its clergy became more and more powerful. The local churches increased in number, and so did the clergy. The idea of more than one bishop in one city seems not to have occurred, although it would have been more in accordance with Scripture. Eusebius, who became bishop of Caesarea in 314, wrote in his Ecclesiastical History (quoting from the third book of Irenaeus against Heresies) that Polycarpus, who died in 166/7, was not only instructed by the apostles and conversed with many who had seen the Lord, but was also appointed bishop by apostles in Asia in the church in Smyrna. The idea of the one bishop in a certain city was in this manner traced back to apostolic times, though Scripture itself speaks against it. What we find is an increasing number of presbyters. They became more and more important as the representatives of the bishops at local gatherings for instruction and, ultimately, for the celebration of the Eucharist. The presbyters became responsible for the neighbouring assemblies in a large city, although within the bishop's charge.

It is in the third century that we see the beginnings of an organization of the church above the local level. In the preceding century there had already been councils of bishops on a regional basis, debating about the Montanist crisis in Asia Minor and about the date of Easter. These councils became more and more usual.

The bishops also cooperated to appoint *new* bishops. Bishops were chosen by the local congregation and consequently appointed by the neighbouring bishops who laid their hands on their new colleague. Eusebius tells us how in the year 230 the bishops of Caesarea and Jerusalem together ordained Origenes to the presbytery by the laying on of hands (Eccl. Hist. VI 8: 4); some years before, in about 215, the bishops of these two cities 'requested' him to discourse and expound the divine Scriptures publicly in the church', although he had not yet received ordination to the presbytery (Eccl. Hist. VI 19, 16). New tasks and new ministers appeared on the scene: Eusebius quotes from a letter of Cornelius, bishop of Rome in the middle of the third century, informing us concerning the clerical system in Rome. There was 1 bishop, and there were 46 presbyters, 7 deacons, 7 sub-deacons, 42 acolytes, 52 exorcists, readers and doorkeepers (Eccl. Hist. VI 43:11). These developments did not only take place in Asia Minor and in Europe, but also in North Africa; on this continent there were bishops in about 200 cities at the end of the third century.

The fourth century

Under the emperor Constantine the Great (305-337) Christianity became favoured, and under Theodosius the Great (379-395) the state religion. It was inevitable that under such circumstances the clergy should occupy a privileged position. In 313 Constantine the Great exempted them from 'munera', personal services to the state without compensation (Eus., Eccl. Hist. X 7). The most expensive of these charges were the upkeep of the public post and the furnishing of quarters (hospitium), and rendering other services in connection with movements of troops, officials and supplies.

In 319 Constantine exempted the clergy from taxation too, so that all their attention could be paid to the duties of their office. In addition to their authority in dogma and church discipline the bishops also acquired considerable power in secular affairs. During the periods of persecution in the third century many Christians had regularly submitted legal differences to the arbitration of their bishops, rather than resort to tribunals of the state. Constantine the Great gave legal sanction to episcopal arbitration in civil cases. The local church was now

recognized as a corporation that could own property. The bishop and his deacons became administrators of extensive properties.

But also within the church things changed. Some bishops exerted spiritual authority over surrounding areas so that a system of mother and daughter churches came into being. The bishops of Rome, Alexandria, Antioch and Constantinople were now metropolitans, which means that they were recognized (by the Council of Nicaea in 325) as preeminent in their own areas.

Meanwhile the growth in authority of the bishop of Rome was of vital significance. In Rome the bishop claimed the primacy, not because of the status of his city in the empire, which was seen as an historical accident; but it was asserted that Rome's position was due to its bishop's position as successor to Peter, seen as the founder of the Roman church, on whom Christ had promised to build His church. This view, though not for some time accepted even in the West, was the foundation for the eventual supremacy of the bishop of Rome in the Middle Ages.

Monasticism

The late third and early fourth centuries saw the beginnings of monasticism (from the Gr. monos, 'alone'), which became so marked a feature of religious life in the Middle Ages. It originated in the ascetic tendencies of early Christians and may have been an expression of despair about social and economic conditions on the one hand and on the other a longing for a pure Christianity and a deep communion with God, which they considered unattainable in the existing churches. The chief characteristics of early Christian monasticism were celibacy, fasting, prayer, surrender of worldly goods and the adoption of a hermit's life.

This way of life was developed in Egypt at the edge of the desert or in oases. Although he may not have been the earliest, Antony, an Egyptian peasant, was the first famous hermit, who started his monastic career in the year 285. His life, written by Athanasius, had a great influence on others, who followed his example. In this way unregulated monastic communities arose spontaneously out of loosely associated groups.

From these unregulated colonies gradually evolved an organized form of monasticism, where members lived a common life within a walled enclosure under the direction of new type of cleric, the abbot, who enforced rules governing their religious life and daily labour. This communal monasticism was begun about 320 by Pachomius, a converted soldier, who after discharge spent some time as a hermit

before setting up his first ascetic community in upper-Egypt. His 'rule' of monastic life was widely adopted. He also opposed extremism by insisting on regular meals and worship, and he aimed to make his communities self-supporting through such industries as the weaving of palm mats or growing fruit and vegetables for sale.

We have seen that monasticism arose first out of eastern Christianity. But also in the West monasticism had the backing of church leaders such as Ambrose (who died in 397) from the very beginning. In this way it spread to Italy, Gaul and other parts of the western empire. Benedict became famous, founder of the monastery at Monte Cassino about 520. The Benedictine rule required monks to read as well as to work and to worship. This stimulated the collection of libraries in the monasteries and made the monks guardians of classical and biblical literature through the Middle Ages.

The Eastern monks were especially noted for their fanaticism. Everywhere the abuses of early unregulated monastic life led to attempts to subject the monks who were not regular clergy to the authority of the bishops. In Asia Minor it was Basil, himself a bishop (370) and an ascetic, who integrated the monastic communities more closely with the church. He believed the bishop should have the ultimate authority over a monastery. His rule also, which discouraged excessive asceticism and stressed study and useful labour, became very popular.

Epilogue

We have seen that in early Christianity little was left of the sound teaching of the apostles. Our story is actually a very sad one. One remark should be added, however. Systems and ways of thinking have been criticized, but not persons. We are not able or allowed to judge the hearts and motives, but we have felt obliged to judge certain words and practices. And for all the days of Christianity, past, present and future, we may know that what Paul wrote to Timothy a very long time ago remains true: 'Yet the firm foundation of God stands, having this seal, The Lord knows those that are His'. In this article we have been occupied with the other side of the same seal: 'Let every one who names the name of the Lord withdraw from iniquity' (2 Timothy 2:19). May the Lord give us His grace (to carry this responsibility, until He comes!

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