

EARLY CHURCH HISTORY

The First 300 years

Period Two

“The Apostolic Fathers”

Post-Apostolic Period

(A.D. 70-150)

The Significant Issue:

*the establishment of authority and orthodoxy
after the apostles*

(loss of the church's stabilizing center)

1. Centralization & Standardization of church structures (i.e. church gov't)
 - Rise of the office of bishop
2. Recognition of a Christian Canon

Development of Church Structure

Under the Apostles

1. The Apostles were the center and authority of the early church
 - Had many “fellow-workers”, work of prophets and evangelists
2. Appointment of presbyters/episcopates as shepherds of local churches
 - One office—different titles
 - Patterned after synagogue—plurality
3. New office—diakonos (“deacon”)
 - Service; rises out of necessity

Form: Plurality of presbyters giving oversight to loosely knit communities of believers (multiple groups) under the oversight of the apostles

Important Fact for Church History:

**The unique nature and authority of the apostolic office—no succession of this office!*

Two Questions

1. Is it possible to duplicate the form of church government described in the NT?
2. Does the NT prescribe a certain form of church government to be enacted after the apostles?

Or

Is the form described in the NT meant to be the prescribed mold or is it a foundational form that is developing?

Post-Apostolic Period

(A.D. 70-150)

The Apostolic Fathers

Clement of Rome

- “bishop” of Rome from 92-101; wrote letter to the church at Cornith

Ignatius of Antioch (35-107)

- “bishop” of Antioch from 69-107; wrote seven letters to various churches (martyred)

Polycarp (60-155)

- “bishop” of Smyrna for 50+ years; wrote letter to the church at Philippi; “The Martyrdom of Polycarp” (from Smyrna to Philomelium)

Post-Apostolic Period

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Other Writings

The Didache

- written about year 90; “The teaching of the Lord to the Gentiles by the Twelve Apostles”
A manual of church order & practice

The Shepherd of Hermas

- Unknown who Hermas was; “The Shepherd” is an exhortation to piety, deals with post-baptismal sins (written before 130)

Epistle of Barnabas

- Deals with relationship between Judaism and Christianity; Christian interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures—uses allegorical method

Development of Church Structure **Post-Apostolic**

Growth of the Episcopate

(gradual development—not uniform)

➤ **Stages**

- ◆ Distinction between episcopates and presbyters (*Ignatius of Antioch*—107)
- ◆ Emphasizing of the episcopate's Importance

Three-fold distinction in leadership:

1. Single Bishop (episkopas)
2. Group of Elders (presbytery)
3. Group of Deacons

Bishop-Presbyter Distinction:

➤ **Origin**

a.) *Apostolic Origin:*

- No direct NT teaching/evidence
- parallel with apostolic co-workers
- good historical evidence of apostolic appointment of Polycarp (maybe Ignatius; also Rome & Jerusalem)

OR

b.) *Post-Apostolic Origin:*

- arose gradually out the presbytery
- non-“apostolic” churches

Conclusion: combination of the two

*By 150, all churches have this threefold distinction in church leadership

- not viewed as against NT (apostolic) form of church government
- driven by very practical needs

Growth of the Episcopate

➤ **Form**

- ◆ Congregational bishops, not diocesan
- ◆ No hierarchy among bishops

➤ **Reasons**

- ◆ Natural—the need for a “president” among the presbyters (synagogue)
- ◆ Practical—Need for an administrative officer (funds) and full-time worker
- ◆ Theological—void left by the apostles; trend toward centralization; succession from the apostles (threat of heresy and the absence of a defined canon)