

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

BISHOPS AND PRESBYTERS IN THE EPISTLE
OF ST. CLEMENT OF ROME.

IT seems to be generally believed that the terms *ἐπίσκοπος* and *πρεσβύτερος* are applied in the letter of St. Clement of Rome indiscriminately to the same persons, and the assumption that this is the case underlies a good many of the arguments against any distinction between the two corresponding offices having been recognized in the apostolic age. The subject of the origins of the Christian ministry is one of such great interest and importance, and at the same time of such obscurity, that a fresh examination of one little corner of the field of evidence is perhaps excusable, well trodden as the ground is. I desire to confine myself in this paper strictly to one question, viz. the nature of the evidence afforded by the Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians as to the usage of the terms *ἐπίσκοπος* and *πρεσβύτερος* at Corinth during the last decade of the first century. Leaving on one side all other evidence, I ask whether the language of this Epistle would suggest that the *denotation* (as the logicians say) of the terms was coextensive in the year 95 A.D. Does Clement contemplate a state of things at Corinth in which all presbyters were bishops and all bishops were presbyters? Or does his letter suggest that the *ἐπίσκοποι* were a class of officials distinct from the general body of *πρεσβύτεροι*, in the mind of his correspondents? I put the question in this way, because it seems to me (whether rightly or wrongly) that critics have been too apt to interpret Clement's language in the light of their preconceived conclusions as to the history of the development of the episcopate. They have in many cases approached the Epistle with the conviction that during the first century the office of *ἐπίσκοπος* was not conceived as distinct from the office of *πρεσβύτερος*; and

they have thus been led to pass over the indications which seem—to me at least—to suggest a different conclusion. At any rate, I propose to examine Clement's letter afresh, leaving aside for the moment all the other available evidence. That would afford material for a much larger essay than this slight sketch.

What was Clement's object in writing to the Church of Corinth? The letter was, we know, called forth by a schism which had appeared among the Christians in that city. But what was the nature of the schism? That is the problem to which we must address ourselves in the first instance.

i. The schism was originated and fostered by a few men only: it was a detestable and unholy sedition *ἡν ὀλίγα πρόσωπα προπετηὴ καὶ ἀυθάδη ὑπάρχοντα . . . ἐξέκαυσαν* (§ 1). It was got up "for the sake of one or two persons," *δι' ἐν ἡ δύο πρόσωπα* (§ 47).

ii. The cause of the sedition or schism was *jealousy*. This comes out again and again. In § 3 *ζήλος καὶ φθόνος* are deprecated; examples of jealousy are given as a warning, such as Cain, Esau, Joseph's brethren, the opponents of Moses, Aaron and Miriam, and of David (§ 4), the persecutors of the Apostles (§ 5), and of holy women (§ 6). The Corinthian Christians are bidden to root out this jealousy (§§ 9, 63), and to be jealous instead for the things that pertain to salvation (§ 45). And the point of the appeal (to which we shall again return) in § 43 is that as Dathan and Abiram (cf. also § 4) were jealous of the prerogatives of the sons of Levi (Numb. xvii.), so also were the leaders of the sedition at Corinth actuated by jealousy of others.

iii. The sedition was directed against the *πρεσβύτεροι*: *στασιάζειν πρὸς τοὺς πρεσβυτέρους* is the phrase used (§ 47). See also § 3. In some sort, the course adopted had been derogatory to the presbyters, for Clement observes (§ 44): "Happy are those presbyters who have gone before, seeing

that their departure was fruitful and ripe, for they have no fear lest any one should remove them from their appointed office" (τόπος). The revolt was an invasion of presbyteral authority, and the ringleaders are bidden to submit themselves to the presbyters in repentance: *ὑμεῖς οὖν, οἱ τὴν καταβολὴν τῆς στάσεως ποιήσαντες, ὑποτάγητε τοῖς πρεσβυτέροις* (§ 57). They are entreated to give way, that the flock of Christ may be at peace with its duly appointed presbyters, *μετὰ τῶν καθεσταμένων πρεσβυτέρων* (§ 54).

iv. It is apparent, then, that one or two men desired through jealousy and envy to grasp a station of dignity which was not theirs by lawful appointment, and that this action of theirs was really a revolt against the authority of the presbyters. They are told by Clement: "It is better for you to be found little in the flock of Christ and to be of good repute (*ἐλλογίμους*) than to be had in exceeding honour and yet be cast out from the hope of Him" (§ 57).

v. The climax of the revolt is thus described by Clement: *ὁρῶμεν γὰρ ὅτι ἐνίους ὑμεῖς μετηγάγετε καλῶς πολιτευομένους ἐκ τῆς ἀμέμπτως αὐτοῖς τετηρημένης¹ λειτουργίας* (§ 44), viz.: "For we see that ye displaced some men, though they were living honourably, from the service which had been blamelessly discharged by them." Now the question before us is this: Who were the men thus displaced? Were they members of the presbyteral body, thrust out to make room for the jealous intruders who had no claim except that they were faction leaders? And was this the invasion of presbyteral authority of which the schismatics were guilty? To answer this question we must scrutinize with care the words actually used. The men who were "displaced" had discharged an office which is described as one of *λειτουργία*. Is this only a general term, or is it descriptive of any special kind of service? In particular, does it stand for a service in which presbyters took part?

¹ This is Lightfoot's emendation of the MS. *τετιμημένης*.

vi. The answer is not doubtful. *λειτουργία* is never once applied in the Epistle to the actions discharged by men called *πρεσβυτέροι*. It is habitually applied to the service of those who held the office of *ἐπίσκοπή*, or of those who were (in Clement's thought) their precursors and types under the Old Covenant. This will appear the more clearly if the argument of §§ 37-47 be analysed.

vii. Subordination of offices, Clement urges, is God's appointment. We are members of One Body (§ 37). Each man has his proper function and gift, not that of another man (§ 38). We ought to do all things in order. In particular, God commanded "that offerings and services to be performed carefully," *τὰς προσφορὰς καὶ λειτουργίας ἐπιμελῶς ἐπιτελεῖσθαι* (§ 40). They should be performed at the proper times and by the proper persons. So under the Old Covenant, *τῷ ἀρχιερεὶ ἴδιαι λειτουργίαι δεδομέναί εἰσίν, καὶ τοῖς ἱερεῦσιν ἴδιος ὁ τόπος προστέτακται, καὶ λευίταις ἴδιαι διακονίαι ἐπίκεινται ὁ λαϊκὸς ἄνθρωπος τοῖς λαϊκοῖς προστάγμασιν δέδεται*, i.e. "To the high priest his proper services have been assigned, and to the priests their proper place has been appointed and upon the Levites their proper ministrations are laid. The layman is bound by the layman's ordinances" (§ 40). In other words *λειτουργία* was the special service of the high priest; the offering was made *διὰ τοῦ ἀρχιερέως καὶ τῶν προειρημένων λειτουργῶν* (§ 41). Death was the penalty for breaking this law (cf. Num. xviii. 7). So it is too under the New Covenant. God sent Christ; Christ sent the Apostles; the Apostles "appointed their firstfruits to be bishops and deacons unto them that should believe," as the prophet had foretold: *καθίστανον τὰς ἀπαρχὰς αὐτῶν, δοκιμάσαντες τῷ πνεύματι, εἰς ἐπίσκοπους καὶ διακόνους τῶν μελλόντων πιστεύειν* (§ 42; cf. Isa. lx. 17). Is it thought strange that such provision should be made for the future worship of the Church? Let us remember that Moses made a similar ordinance when jealousy provoked Dathan

and Abiram to stir up sedition against him (cf. § 4), and to claim priestly prerogatives to which they had no right. But Moses, that such disorder might never arise again, provided that the high-priestly office should always remain with Aaron's family, and he obtained the people's assent thereto (§ 43; cf. Num. xvi., xvii.). Now the Apostles knew that there would be strife over the *ἐπισκοπή* just as Moses knew that there would be strife over the *ιερωσύνη*: and so the Apostles appointed "the aforesaid persons [i.e. *ἐπίσκοποι καὶ διακόνου*] and afterwards they gave a further injunction [reading *ἐπινομήν*] that if they should fall asleep, other approved men (*δεδοκιμασμένοι*) should succeed to their service (*λειτουργία*). Those, therefore, who were appointed by them or afterwards by other men of good repute (*ἐλλογίμων*) with the consent of the whole Church [this corresponding to the assent of the whole people of Israel in the case of Aaron's priesthood], and who have served (*λειτουργήσαντας*) the flock of Christ blamelessly, . . . these men we consider to have been unjustly thrust out from the service (*λειτουργία*). For it will be no light sin if we thrust out from the episcopate those who have offered the gifts blamelessly and holily (*ἐὰν τοὺς ἀμέμπτως καὶ ὁσίως προσενεγκόντας τὰ δῶρα τῆς ἐπισκοπῆς ἀποβάλωμεν*), Happy are those presbyters who have gone before seeing that their departure is fruitful and ripe; for they have no fear lest any should remove them from their appointed office (*τόπος*). For we see that ye (*ὁμεῖς*, with emphasis) have displaced some men living honourably from the service (*λειτουργία*) blamelessly discharged by them" (§ 44).

viii. This long analysis of Clement's reasoning may serve to bring out the parallel he urges between Moses' action in perpetuating the priesthood in Aaron's family, and the Apostles' action in providing for due succession of *ἐπίσκοποι*. Further, the sedition raging at Corinth was strictly parallel

to the sedition of Dathan and Abiram. Both were inspired by jealousy (§ 4); both are conceived as directed—not against Aaron in the one case and the ἐπίσκοποι in the other (although the result of Dathan's schism, if successful, would have been to depose Aaron, as in the Corinthian schism some ἐπίσκοποι were deposed), but—in the one case against Moses (§ 4), with whom were associated the Israelitish presbyters (Num. xvi. 25), and in the other case against the Corinthian presbyters. Yet again the service of Aaron was a λειτουργία; so was the service of the ἐπίσκοποι. That term is not used by Clement of the work of the presbyters either under the Old or the New Covenant.

ix. When the office of a presbyter is spoken of in the Epistle, the word used is the general term τόπος.¹ This is significant only because of the careful avoidance of the term λειτουργία, which is applied all through to the service of worship performed by the ἐπίσκοπος or his precursors (in Clement's view) under the Old Covenant.² Λειτουργία is the word employed in Numbers xvi., xvii. of the service of the sanctuary performed by the priests and Levites. So we have it in § 32, § 40 (twice), § 43; and then in § 44 it is applied to the corresponding work of the ἐπίσκοποι (four times). It could not be applied by Clement to the office of the presbyters any more than it could be applied to the office of Moses or the Israelitish presbyters against whom Dathan's rebellion was directed. We miss the whole point of Clement's argument if we do not see that just as Moses

¹ In the letter of the Churches of Vienne (Eus. H. E. v. 4), it is said of Irenaeus, "a presbyter": *εἰ γὰρ ἤδειμεν τόπον τινὶ δικαιοσύνην περιποιεῖσθαι, ὡς πρεσβύτερον ἐκκλησίας, ὅπερ ἐστὶν ἐπ' αὐτῶ, ἐν πρώτοις ἂν παρεθέμεθα.* But the term is a quite general one, and is applied to the ἐπισκοπή in the Apostolic Constitutions. Cf. Acts i. 25, τὸν τόπον τῆς διακονίας.

² It is indeed used sometimes (§§ 8, 9, 20, 34, 41) in a more general sense; but there can be no doubt that Clement uses it of the ἐπισκόποι in §§ 37-47 in a special sense corresponding to the special sense in which it is employed of priests and Levites throughout the Old Testament.

corresponds in his thought to the Apostles, and Aaron to the first *ἐπίσκοποι*, so the *πρεσβύτεροι* of the Christian Church correspond, so far as rule is concerned, to the successors of Moses and the *ἐπίσκοποι* to the successors of Aaron. It is the office of the *ἐπίσκοποι* "to offer the gifts," i.e. the gifts of Eucharistic worship (*προσφέρειν τὰ δῶρα*, § 44); it is the office of the *πρεσβύτεροι* to choose the *ἐπίσκοποι* (§ 44), and generally, to exercise functions of rule (cf. §§ 21, 54, 57).¹

x. We may now return to the question stated above in v. The state of things at Corinth seems to have been as follows. The presbyters there, as in the early Christian communities generally, occupied a position of authority, similar in many respects to that of the Jewish presbyters under the Old Covenant. These presbyters in the second Christian generation and those which followed it were entrusted with the duty proper to the Apostles in the earliest period, of appointing certain persons to the (quite distinct) office of *ἐπίσκοπος*, a principal part of the episcopal office being the superintendence of worship. The *ἐπίσκοποι* were as distinct from the *πρεσβύτεροι* as the priests were from the elders under the Jewish dispensation. At Corinth one or two unruly faction mongers had succeeded (not without the co-operation of the Church at large; see *ὑμεῖς* § 44) in displacing some *ἐπίσκοποι* from their *λειτουργία*. The motive of their action was jealousy of the peculiar prerogative as to the conduct of worship attaching to the episcopal office, just as the motive of Dathan and Abiram was jealousy of Aaron's family. But exactly as Dathan's sedition was in fact a rebellion against the authority of Moses and the elders (Num. xvi. 13), so this revolt at Corinth was a revolt

¹ It will be observed that the *ἐπίσκοποι* are twice described as "approved" men (*δεδοκιμασμένοι*), approved, that is, by those to whom their selection is entrusted (§§ 42, 44); these latter are *ἐλλόγιμοι*, men of repute, whose names are on God's roll (§§ 44, 58). *ἐλλόγιμος* is used again in § 57 as descriptive of the character which the faction leaders should content themselves with.

against the authority of the presbyters. Only those who could appoint to the episcopate had the right to depose from it; and for other members of the Church to assume to themselves the power of deposition was an invasion of the presbyteral office (*τόπος*, § 44). The presbyters who had died were "happy," for no one could now treat *them* with such indignity (§ 44).

xi. I maintain, then, that the whole tenor of Clement's argument no less than his careful choice of words compels us to recognize a fundamental distinction between the *πρεσβύτεροι* and the *ἐπίσκοποι* at Corinth in the year 95 A.D. That there were several *ἐπίσκοποι* is plain; the monarchical episcopate had not yet established itself there any more than it had a few years earlier at Philippi (Phil. i. 1). But that the *ἐπίσκοποι* as ministers of worship are quite distinct from the *πρεσβύτεροι* or ministers of rule, the argument of Clement's Epistle seems almost necessarily to require. Otherwise his long-drawn parallel between the rebellion of Dathan and the rebellion at Corinth is without point. I believe that the rest of the evidence points in the same direction; but for the present it must suffice to have discussed the Epistle of St. Clement of Rome.

J. H. BERNARD.