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A Historical Survey of the First Six Centuries
and Brief Reflection

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EPISCOPACY AND APOSTOLIC SUCCESSION: A HISTORICAL SURVEY OF THE FIRST SIX CENTURIES AND A BRIEF REFLECTION

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Introduction

As may be noted in history, Episcopal debates have been ongoing since the beginning of the first century. In these debates, opposing views on historical apostolic succession were hinged to three main issues. First, was the status question: who is a bishop - a servant or lord? Second, was concerning the exclusive functions of the bishop. Third, was a status issue: does transmission indicate transference of 'apostolic authority' or 'apostolic responsibility'? At various periods in history, especially after Reformation monarchical Episcopality has come under severe criticism for a number of reasons. Some argue from the point of non-availability of biblical evidences for monarchical Episcopality. Others view monarchical Episcopality with historic succession being theological contradictory (preaching of a servant ministry but practicing monarchical over-lording). For reasons such as these and probably some others, which are secular in nature, a democratic system of church polity has become a favored option for many churches.

Traditional churches that conform to the historic Episcopal system have developed their Episcopal theology and concept of apostolic continuity on the basis of Christ's life and ministry and the High Priesthood doctrine of the Old Testament. Christ's life and ministry was characterized by a call; second, it involved intensive teaching and third, culmination in a sending forth with authority (responsibility). By comparison, the Episcopal model practiced by the Early Church differed from that of the later Romanist monarchical Episcopality. In the Romanist practice of mo-

narchical episcopacy with historical succession, shows stronger reliance on Jewish High Priesthood of the Old Testament [Num.27:20]. As in the Reformation era, there is a need among modern churches to rediscover the relevance of apostolic succession and Episcopal care in terms of apostolic responsibility. What is the doctrine of apostolic succession?

The doctrine of apostolic succession means that the mission and sacred power to teach, rule and sanctify that Christ conferred on His Apostles is in accordance with Christ's intentions perpetuated in the college of bishops.¹

The promise of Christ's continuance in power through the apostles, promise of Christ's imposition of authority and continued presence through the apostles ministry are expressly implied notions of the Episcopal ministry and succession of the Apostles. "For in giving them this mission, Christ promised that he would be with them all days even unto the consummation of the world (Matthew 28 : 20)."²

Definition of the Term 'EPISKOPOS' (Bishop)

The term 'episkopos' in singular or the plural 'episkopoi' could be translated as overseer or overseers respectively. "In classical Greek, both gods and men can be described as 'episkopoi' or overseers in general and non-technical sense; inscriptions and papyri of wide distribution use the word to denote magistrates, who some times appear to have administered the revenues of heathen temples...and the word can apply to philosophers, especially Cynics, when acting as spiritual directors or magistrates."³ However the term 'episkope' is used in the Lexicon to denote chief officers or taskmasters as may be noted in the following texts.

- 1) Nehemiah 11 : 9, Their chief was Joel, son of Zichri who was assisted by Judah, son of Hassenuah.
- 2) Isaiah 60:17, I will exchange your brass for gold, your iron for silver, your wood for brass, your stones for iron. Peace and righteousness shall be your taskmasters.

In the New Testament, one could observe 'episcopo' being applied in three different contexts. First, it is "applied pre-eminently to Christ (1 Peter 2:25), next to the apostolic office and finally to the leaders of a local congregation (Philippians 1:1)."⁴

Episcopacy and Historical Succession: A Perspective from the First Six Centuries

In this section I would like to draw attention to the writings of the Early Church fathers in discussing the nature, theology and history of the doctrine of Episcopacy and Historical Apostolic Succession. Primary resources referred to shall include the writings of St. Ignatius, Clement of Rome, St. Polycarp, Origen, Tertullian, Hippolytus and Cyprian. Further reference shall also be made from various synodical decrees.

Clement of Rome

One of the earliest extra biblical documents which sheds light on the development of this concept of ecclesiastical polity is the 'Epistle of Clement of Rome to the Corinthian Church' dated around A.D. 96. In section XLII Clement wrote:

The Apostles received the Gospel for our sakes from the Lord Jesus Christ; Jesus the Christ was sent from God. Christ therefore is from God, and the Apostles are to God's will. So when they had received their orders and had been fulfilled with confidence by the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ and confirmed in faith by the word of God, they went out in confidence of the Holy Spirit, preaching the gospel, that the Kingdom of Christ was about to come. So, preaching in country and city, they appointed their first fruits, having tested them by the Spirit, to be bishops and deacons of those who should believe. And this was no novelty, for long ago it had been written concerning bishops and deacons.⁵

The objective of this epistle was mainly to correct leadership conflicts in the Corinthian church. St. Clement attempted to resolve the problem by pointing out that the right of Episcopal care and leadership was vested upon the bishop through apostolic appointment or for want of another expression, apostolic succession. Again in section 44, he wrote:

Our Apostles who knew through our Lord Jesus Christ that there would be strife over the name of the bishop's office. So for this reason, since they had perfect foreknowledge, they appointed the afore-said persons and subsequently gave permanence, so that if they should fall asleep, other approved men should succeed to their ministry. Man, therefore who were appointed by the apostles, or subse-

quently by other eminent man, with approval of the whole church and have ministered blamelessly to the flock of Christ in humble, peaceable and worthy way and have testimony borne by all for long periods - such men we consider are unjustly deposed from their ministry. For it will be no small sin on our part if we depose from the Episcopal office those who have in blameless and holy ways offered the gift.⁶

The leadership crisis in the Corinthian church did not focus merely on the Episcopal function, but included a much wider and deeper resentment towards the general ecclesiastical order within the church. Clement recognized it. He therefore attempted to explain the importance of the ecclesiastical structure using the Old Testament analogy of Levitical Priesthood. In section XL of the letter to the Corinthians he wrote:

This being plain, we must do all things decently and in order, as our heavenly Master wills. The appointed times, fixed places, the proper ministers, must be respected in making our offerings...In the law of Moses the high priest, the priests, the Levites, the laity all have their distinct function.⁷

As Bishop Lightfoot, notes the “offence of the Corinthians was contempt of ecclesiastical order. They resisted and ejected their lawfully appointed presbyters.”⁸ The Corinthian controversy resulted in the poor observation of sacraments and reception of offerings, which was partly due to the eviction of the apostolic representatives. It was therefore Clement’s intention to “insist that these offerings should be made at the right time, right place through the right persons.”⁹ The right persons to Clement were the presbyters appointed by the apostles. Even Paul alluded to this existent problem within the Corinthian church in chapter 9 of his first Epistle to the congregation. Here Paul makes his defense concerning his call and apostleship. However, it must be admitted that in Clement’s epistle, one would not be able to trace a systematic development and exposition concerning the doctrine of Episcopacy according to historical succession. Yet one could safely assume that the concept of apostolic succession was slowly taking form. One could therefore conclude that monarchical Episcopacy was still at its early stages of infancy. However, Clement’s typical reference to the hierarchical Levitical priesthood in relation to ecclesiastical structure and function makes one wonder if the idea of Episcopal monarchy was already a popular idea then. But what is more emphatic in Clement’s writings is the procedure of appointing

church officials; an endowed responsibility of the Apostles. He mentions that apostles appointed leaders in every church either directly or indirectly. Apostles “first appointed approved persons and afterwards provided for a succession so that vacancies by death should be filled by other approved men.”¹⁰

Ignatius

However, in the writings of Ignatius, martyred around A.D. 110-115, we have a progressed account of the monarchical Episcopal doctrine. In Ignatius’ writings we also find the first account of the Episcopal office being distinguished from the presbytery and diaconate, and evidence for the practice of the three-fold ministry by the Early Church. Ignatius in his Epistle to the Philadelphians commends the congregation for their submission to the ecclesiastical order and the jurisdiction of the bishop.

This church I salute in the blood of Christ. She is a source of everlasting joy, especially when the members are at one with the bishop and his assistant the presbyter and the deacons, that have been appointed in accordance with the wish of Jesus Christ and who He has by his own will through the operation of His Holy Spirit, confirmed in loyalty.

The distinctness of the bishop’s office becomes obvious in his epistle to the Symrneans.

You all must follow the lead of the Bishop as Jesus Christ followed that of the Father, follow the presbytery as you would the Apostles, reverence the deacons as you would God’s commandments...He who does anything without the knowledge of the bishop worships the devil.¹¹

The leadership function assigned to the office of bishop in the above text not only encompass a distinctiveness but also attaches with it a spiritual character by designating it a divine institution. The study of Ignatius’ teaching on Episcopacy according to apostolic succession constitute four characteristic features:

Bishops Share the Mind of Christ

In promoting the primacy of the Episcopal office and collegiality of the bishops, Ignatius maintained that however far they are from each other are still united in the mind of Christ. Implying they share the similar unity as the Son shares with the Father.¹²

Bishop's Office is Superior to the Presbyterate – Functionally But Not in Status

Ignatius stands as the first Apostolic Church Father to affirm the functional variety found within the three-fold ministry. Although he maintains monarchical Episcopalianism, nevertheless he is quick to point out the co-equality in status shared between the bishop, presbyter and deacon. No one is higher than the other in status except in function. Within this given Ignatian framework, although all three officers shared a co-equal and common status, yet leadership responsibility was exclusively vested upon the bishop. “Act in concert with your bishop, as you are now doing. Your presbytery stands in the same relationship to the bishop as the strings to the Lyre”¹³ Let us obey our bishop, if we would be God's people.¹⁴ It may also be noted in Ignatius' writings, he always designates the bishop's office in singularity and the presbytery in plurality. It is indicative of a system where each church had one bishop but several presbyters. This is well attested in his letter to the Magnesians. “As the Lord Jesus did nothing without the Father so must ye do nothing without your bishop and presbyters”.¹⁵

Bishops are Successors of the Apostles

In addressing the issue of Apostolic continuity through the Episcopal office and obedience to the bishop, Ignatius often drew connection between obedience to Christ as being exemplified in the obedience to the bishop. “When ye submit to your bishop as to Jesus Christ, ye live after Jesus Christ...Do nothing without your bishop and be obedient also to the presbyters as to the Apostles of Jesus Christ”.¹⁶

The Supremacy of the Bishop in the Church

Ignatius in his letter to the Symrneans advocates that the bishops played a supreme role in the church. “The bishop, argues Ignatius, is the center of each individual church, as Jesus Christ is the center of the uni-

versal church.”¹⁷ There are two specific implications to this Ignatian statement, namely:

- Centrality of the Episcopal chair must not be misconstrued as representing mere apostolic authority but responsibility.
- Episcopal responsibility does not imply a mere call to discharge administrative responsibilities but remain a divine institution.

The Magnesian Epistle and Philadelphian Epistle describe this well. “But for you too, it is fitting not to take advantage of the bishop’s youth, but rather because he embodies the authority of God the Father, to show him every mark of respect and you presbyters, so I learn, are doing just that”.¹⁸

I exhort you to strive to do all things in harmony with God: the bishop is to preside in the place of God, while the presbyters are to function as the council of Apostles, and the deacons who are most dear to me, are entrusted with the ministry of Jesus Christ.¹⁹

I cried aloud, when I was among you, I spake with a loud voice, with the voice of God. “Give heed unto the bishop and presbytery and deacons”, but they suspected that I said this because I knew beforehand the division caused by some. Yet He is my witness, whose prisoner I am, that I learnt not from human flesh. But it was the Spirit who kept preaching in these words: “Do nothing without the bishop”.²⁰

Although it would still be premature to arrive at the conclusion that Ignatius was referring to an already consolidated monarchical Episcopal system, we could infer that this was at least the direction the church was moving towards. Nevertheless in Ignatius we have better knowledge concerning the three-fold ministry as exercised in the Early Church. He clearly maintained the supremacy of the Episcopal chair, both from the perspective of apostolic succession and divine institution but carefully avoided attaching authoritarian notions. As we move into the mid-third century, we have a more developed expression on Episcopacy as referred in the writings of Tertullian, Hippolytus and Cyprian.

Tertullian

Tertullian in his ‘On Modesty I’, differentiates between Episcopal authority and the authority that of the presbytery and deaconate. Within a hierarchical framework he placed the authority of the bishop above the

presbytery and diaconate. The issue Tertullian was addressing then was the conflict that had arisen over the administration of the sacraments. In defending Episcopal supremacy, he affirmed the unity between High Priesthood and the Episcopal office. He said, "The High Priest who is the Bishop has of course the right to confer it, then the presbyter and deacons not however without the bishops authority, out of respect to the church. When this respect is maintained, peace is secure."²¹

Hippolytus of Rome

Hippolytus of Rome, in his celebrated 'Apostolic Tradition', provided a more comprehensive enumeration concerning the primacy of the bishop, manner of election and consecration of the bishop. In this text, he pointed out that the presbytery merely played a secondary role either in the election or consecration of the bishop.

Let the bishop be ordained, being in all things without fault, chosen by all people. And when he has been proposed and found acceptable to all, the people shall assemble on the Lord's Day, together with the presbytery and such bishops as may attend. With agreement of all, let the bishops lay hands on him and the presbytery stand in silence. Let all observe silence, praying in their heart for the descent of the Holy Spirit. Then at the request of all, let one of the bishops standing by impose hands on the candidate for episcopacy, praying over him.²²

The clear distinction between the office of the bishop and the presbytery is very apparent in the writings of Hippolytus. Functionally and hierarchically, Hippolytus maintains the distinctness of the Episcopal office.

Cyprian

Edward White Benson in his book 'Cyprian-His life-His time- His work', analyzes Cyprian's thought and understanding on Episcopacy. Benson reports that, Cyprian first understood the role of a bishop as a chief arbiter acting from the position of a chief priest and secondly that his post has been endowed with a specific grace which is exclusive and effective. Benson also points to the fact, that by Cyprian's time the office of the bishop had already been elevated to that of the chief ecclesiastical officer and recognized so even by the secular state. Therefore initial per-

secutions were directed against the bishop and their property. "As a matter of order, the eminence of the rank of the bishop was visible to the Roman world. He was the chief of the Christian society, the confiscation of his property was the first, for a time the only edict of persecuting magistrates."²³ Cyprian, being a bishop himself maintained the primacy of the Episcopal office but indicated that the selection of the bishop was from among the presbyters. "In the assembly from the midst of the separate semicircle of presbyters rose his chair or throne, already the universal name and symbol of his authority."²⁴ Cyprian, like Tertullian, described episcopacy in terms of the Old Testament Levitical High Priesthood and believed "it is (1) an inheritance from the apostles and (2) a succession to the Levitical Priesthood, only more glorious in being the fulfillment of that priesthood type."²⁵ Though this has been a popular trend, that is associating the high priest with the bishop, priest with the pastor, Levites with the presbyters and Israel with the congregation, theological opinion is very much divided on ascribing episcopacy a Jewish origin.

Cyprian by accepting the Jewish interpretation for Episcopal origin believed that any act against the bishop is a punishable sin. He maintained that, "to invade the office of the rightful bishop is identically the sin of Korak."²⁶ Cyprian too makes a strong connection between episcopacy and historical apostolic succession. This relatedness is expressed in his letter 'XXVI to the lapsed' where he ascribed to the bishops control, power and authority on the basis of apostolic succession.

Our Lord, whose precepts and admonitions we ought to observe describing the honor of a bishop and the order of his church, speaks in the Gospel and says to Peter, I say unto thee, that thou art Peter and upon this rock will I built my Church...Thence through the changes of time and successions, the ordering of bishops and the plan of the church flow onwards, so that the church is founded upon the bishops and every act of the church is controlled by these same rulers.²⁷

These statements very much coincide with Cyprian's discourse at the Seventh Council of Carthage, indicating that the Episcopal monarchism was by now well established with two characteristic features:

- Historical succession of the Levitical Priesthood.
- Historical succession of the apostolic Priesthood.

At the Seventh Council of Carthage, Cyprian therefore argued using his Episcopal authority to differ on the matter of rebaptism.

No one of us sets himself up a bishop of bishops or by tyrannical terror forces his colleagues to a necessity of obeying; in as much as every bishop in the free use of his liberty and power, has the right of forming his own judgment, and can no more be judges by another than he can himself judge another. But we all must wait the judgment of our Lord Jesus Christ, who alone has the power, both of setting us in government of His Church, and of judging of our acts therein.²⁸

Again in his proposal to the Church at Carthage and in response to the reception of the lapsed around A.D. 250, Cyprian reprimands the grave error of bypassing the Episcopal representative who is the chief administrator of the church.

I hear, however, that some of the presbyters, neither mindful of the Gospel nor considering what the martyr have written to me, nor reserving to the Bishops the honor due to his priesthood and chair, have already begun to communicate with the lapsed and to offer for them, and give them the Eucharist.²⁹

The final feature of Cyprian's Episcopal theology is his emphasis on the shared equality and unity between the apostles, without providing any room for Petrine supremacy. In his document 'On the Unity of the Catholic Church', Cyprian discusses the question of apostolic succession on the basis of God's promise to Peter, but consciously affirms that the apostles carried equal honor, authority and power.

This unity firmly should we hold and maintain, especially we bishops, presiding in the church, in order that we may approve the episcopate itself to be one and undivided...The episcopate is one, it is whole in which each bishop enjoys full possession.³⁰

Jerome

As we proceed on to the fourth century, Jerome's extensive writings on Episcopal monarchism indicate the theological interest generated over the issue during that period. Through his works (A.D. 347-420) it could be established that by the mid-fourth century, monarchial episcopalism had almost become established. Apostolic continuity, investment of authority and divine institution of the office were characteristic features of

find frequent and interchangeable usage of the terms, presbyters and bishops. This is very evident in his letter CXLVI, where he wrote, "I am told that some one has been mad enough to put deacons before the presbyters, that is before the bishops."³¹ Jerome's interpretation of apostolic succession and authority therefore is not only shared by the college of bishops but by the whole presbytery. His theory is dependent of two New Testament texts: 2 John 1 and I Peter 5:1-2. In his exegesis of I Peter 5:1-2, Jerome writes:

Peter also say in his first epistle: The presbyters which are among you I exhort who am your fellow presbyter and a witness of the sufferings of Christ and also a partaker of the glory of that shall be revealed, feed the flock of Christ ...taking the oversight therefore not by constraint but willingly, according unto God.³²

But Jerome does explain the synonymy that he considers is present between the office of the bishop and the presbytery. In Jerome's understanding, both offices were co-equal in function and authority but then reluctantly ascribed the leadership function to the Episcopal office. To him Episcopal monarchism was more of a historical development. He therefore rejected the idea of exclusive divine institutionalization and apostolic succession being attached to the office. He attributed heresies being the reason behind the development of Episcopal monarchism. He claimed, when "subsequently one presbyter was chosen to preside over the rest, this was done to remedy and to prevent each individual from rending the church of Christ by drawing it to himself."³³ Again in his letter CXLVII, in refuting the Roman Diaconate in going against the Episcopal leaders, he wrote:

Even at Alexandria, from the time of Mark the Evangelist to the episcopate of Heracles and Dionysius, the presbyters used always to appoint as bishop one chosen out of their number and placed on the higher grade, as if an army should make a commander, or as if deacons should choose one of themselves whom they should know to be diligent and called him archdeacon. For, with the exception of ordaining what does a bishop do which the presbyter does not? The power of riches or the lowliness of poverty does not make him a higher bishop or lower bishop. But all are successors of the Apostles.³⁴

From the above discussion, four aspects stand out clear concerning Jerome's Episcopal theology.

- First, he dates the historical beginning of monarchical episcopatism to the time of Mark the Evangelist.
- Second, he speaks of the apostolic succession in relation to the college of the bishops, which implies all the apostles shared equal honor and authority.
- Third, he does agree that it was the tradition of the Early Church to view the office of the bishop to be functionally higher to that of the presbyters and with the exclusive right to ordain, for practical reasons
- Fourth, one bishop to serve in one church without the right to translate. In his letter to Oceanus in A.D.397, Jerome discusses this issue. He feels that the tradition developed from an erroneous teaching based on the interpretation of bishop's to have the moral character of being a man of one wife.

Some by strained interpretation say that wives are in this passage are to be taken for churches and husbands for their bishops. A decree was made by the fathers assembled at the Council of Nicaea, that non bishops should be translated from one church to another, lest scorning the society of a poor yet virgin see he should seek the embraces of a worthy and adulterous one."³⁵

Some historians view Jerome's understanding on non-translation of a bishop a misunderstanding on his part. The restriction by Nicaea on the bishop's translation was motivated by the confusion caused by bishops moving to richer churches for economic reasons. To circumvent such a problem and instill commitment the analogy of marriage was applied by the Council, scholars claim. The Council of Elvira (around 305) has a clearer description of the issue in its canon 19. "Bishops, presbyters and deacons are not to leave their places in order to engage in trade; nor are they to go round of their provinces in search of profitable markets."³⁶

In Jerome, we do see certain resentment for monarchical Episcopatism. He is one of the church fathers who strongly felt there was an overglorification of the Episcopal office, whereas the New Testament taught that the presbyters and bishops shared the same functional responsibility. He even calls the development of the doctrine of Episcopal monarchism a bad custom of the Early Church.³⁷ Jerome would date the commencement of the system to the Corinthian controversy, where one presbyter was eventually chosen to preside over the rest to avoid heresy from flowing

in. The unique feature of Jerome's Episcopal theology may be found in his belief that all the apostles shared common honor, authority and the promise of Christ. Despite of his reservations and opposed view on Episcopal monarchism, nevertheless he emphasized the importance of the Episcopal office for sake of church unity. In his 'Dialogue against the Luciferans' written around A.D.399, he therefore reprimanded those who had over-ridden the bishop's authority in administration of the sacraments. He concludes his epistle by alluding to the Pentecostal experience of the Apostles in validating the bishop's authority, superiority and responsibility and insisted "that without the ordination and the bishop's license neither the presbyter nor the deacon has the power to baptize"³⁸ He further added, that "the well being of a church depends upon the dignity of its chief priest, and unless some extraordinary and unique function be assigned to him we shall have as many schism in the church as they are priests."³⁹

In summary, Jerome's Episcopal theology is characterized by the overarching concern for the presbytery, which to him ought to be held in common honor and grade with the Episcopal office. He does make allowance for exercise of Episcopal authority and administrative control over the presbyters, deacons and the church in general, and this may not be disputed. Nevertheless he believes monarchical Episcopacy is just a historical development without a biblical mandate. Historical succession is affirmed in Jerome's writings but with stronger emphasis on apostolic responsibility rather than authority as displayed in monarchical Episcopal system.

The Early Councils, Episcopal Care and Apostolic Succession

In this section apart from the seven Ecumenical Councils, we shall also consider responses from Councils prior to Nicaea.

The Council of Alvira - Common Rank But Different Functions

The canons 18, 19 and 33 of the Council of Alvira held in A.D.305, affirmed monarchical Episcopality and the primacy of the bishop as against the presbyters and deacons. This suggests an already existent system of Episcopal primacy. Canon 18 ruled that the succession to each one of the offices within the three-fold ministry is only by promotion. This is indicative of a system, which had three distinct offices with

peculiarity in functions. But it accorded a common rank to all officers within the three-fold ministry with the title cleric. Canon 33 of the same Council affirmed this.

Bishops, presbyters and deacons - indeed all clerics who have a place in ministry [of the altar] shall abstain from wives and shall not beget children - this is a total prohibition: whoever does so, let him forfeit his rank among the clerics.⁴⁰

It could be concluded that by A.D. 300, we already have evidences of a consolidated three tier ecclesiastical system, which had provided the Episcopal office a monarchical outlook, probably out of necessity rather than biblicality.

The Council of Ancyra (A.D.314 - 319) – Episcopal Exclusive Rights

The decrees of the Council of Ancyra point towards further consolidation of the Episcopal office and strengthening of the bishops' authority. This is affirmed when Council of Ancyra decreed that bishops had overriding rights and the right to even grant special concessions.

As many as are being ordained deacons, if at the time of ordination they have made a declaration and stated that they must marry and cannot remain celibate, such persons, should they marry thereafter can remain in their office, as the bishop had granted them the right to marry at their ordination.⁴¹

The Council of Arles – Episcopal Office is Unique

The Council of Arles emphasized the uniqueness and seriousness of the Episcopal office, where no one should claim the right to consecrate a bishop, except by a minimum of three bishops. The same was later affirmed by a Nicene decree.

Concerning these who claim for themselves alone to have the right of ordaining bishops, we decree that no one take this upon himself, unless he be accompanied by other seven bishops. If seven is impossible then they should not dare ordain without three others.⁴²

The Council of Nicaea (A.D.325) - Bishop is Superior

The Council made it emphatic in its canon XVIII that, within the Episcopal monarchical system, the presbyters and the deacons were subjected to the authority of the bishops. A clear demarcation of not only the spiritual authority and responsibility but also a status differentiation between the three offices was also affirmed at Nicaea. The deacons were not allowed to sit with the presbyters or bishops. Being hierarchically inferior, deacons were also required to wait-upon the bishops.

Let all such practices be utterly done away, and let the deacons remain within their bounds, knowing that they are ministers of the bishop and inferiors of the presbyters. Further more, let not the deacons sit among the presbytery for that is contrary to canon and order.⁴³

Since deacons were not expected to serve the presbyters, indicate that the presbytery functioned under the authority of the bishop with a certain element of autonomy. Yet the exclusive nature of the Episcopal office was undisputed.

The Council of Constantinople (A.D. 381) – Bishop the Chief Ruler

The Council of Constantinople further endorsed Episcopal distinctiveness in terms of spiritual and administrative functions and jurisdiction. But the Council in granting such authority was mindful of misuse and practical complications that may arise through the breach of territorial jurisdiction. Therefore the decree added a proviso that:

The bishops are not to go beyond their dioceses to churches lying outside of their bounds, nor bring confusion on the churches. And let not bishops go beyond their dioceses for ordination or any other ecclesiastical ministrations, unless they be invited.⁴⁴

The issue of apostolic succession had by now become well constituted and widely accepted. The jurisdiction of the bishop as the top ecclesiastical officer had also become well entrenched within the ecclesiastical system. Therefore in the subsequent ecumenical council at Ephesus, no discussion on Episcopal powers or jurisdiction was raised (except that it was mentioned, bishops played a significant role in arresting heresy).

The Council of Chalcedon (A.D.451) – Further Powers Granted

At the Council of Chalcedon, we see a resurfacing of the Episcopal issue and further concessions and powers being vested upon the bishop. The most important development at Chalcedon was according authority over the monasteries to the bishop by citing an Early Church tradition. “Let the clergy of the poor - homes, monasteries and martyries remain under the authority of the bishops in every city according to the tradition of the holy Fathers.”⁴⁵ Quoting the neglect of the flock without a bishop, the Council also highlighted the urgency to re-elect a bishop when a vacancy occurred. This too indicates the primacy of the Episcopal office.

For as much as certain of the metropolitans, as we have heard, neglect the flocks committed to them, and delay the ordination of bishops. The Holy Synod has decided that ordinations of the bishops shall take place within three months, unless on inevitable necessity should some time require the term of delay to be prolonged.⁴⁶

The same Council also strictly forbade the demotion of a bishop to the position of the presbyter. “It is sacrilege to degrade a bishop to the rank of a presbyter; but if they are for just cause removed from Episcopal functions, neither ought they have the position of a presbyter.”⁴⁷ The rationale was simple. If a bishop could not discharge duties well, it would indicate non-suitability for ministry in entirety. It becomes obvious that the hierarchical Episcopal system practiced during this period certainly featured the bishop as the exclusive executive of the church with supreme monarchical status. The second and third Councils of Constantinople (the fifth and sixth in the series of the seven ecumenical councils) had probably no real reason to concern themselves with Episcopal matters or jurisdiction any more. Hence the focus of these later councils was entirely different in nature.

Nicaea 2 (A.D.787) - Bishop is Monarch of the Church

This seventh Ecumenical Council endeavored to reaffirm the primacy of the bishop as the monarch of the church. Apart from privileges already granted, this council granted the supreme control of all church property into the hands of the bishop. The spiritual nature of the ecclesiastical offices was also reaffirmed and thereby declared that no state au-

thority had the right to grant ordination. It was maintained that such right was exclusive to the prerogative bishop.

Canon III - every election of a bishop, presbyter or deacon made by princes stands null...It is most fitting that a bishop be ordained by all the bishops in the province.⁴⁸

Canon XII - Let the bishop take care of all the church goods, and let him administer the same according as in the sight of God.⁴⁹

Canon XVI - is important as it endorses the need to recognize and obey ecclesiastical orders as a spiritual responsibility. That there is a certain order established in the priesthood is very evident to all, and to guard diligently the promotions of the priesthood is well pleasing to God.⁵⁰

In conclusion to the decrees of the pre and post Nicene councils, we could deduce the following:

- First, that apostolic succession and Episcopal care was accepted and so treated on the basis of the tradition of the early fathers rather than a biblical mandate.
- Second, we see a progressive centralization of power being vested upon the bishop. Again historical reasons, heresy and practical purposes were cited for such development.
- Third, we also notice the spiritualization of the bishop's office. Historical Apostolic succession, which was previously understood in functional terms (apostolic responsibility) evolved to become a status issue (apostolic authority).

Episcopal Monarchism and Theories of Origin

Having considered the historical development and evolution of monarchical Episcopatism vis-à-vis the Ecumenical Councils, here I would like to focus on theories suggested by historians and theologians for its probable origin.

Theory of Circumstance

Some scholars believe that the presbyters of the Early Church were responsible for the administration of the church since apostolic time. This later evolved into a hierarchical system by circumstance, when some able presbyter took total control of it as a permanent chairman. Their deduction is based on the interpretation of writings from Clement and Poly-

carp, where interchangeable use of the terms bishop and presbyter occur. The theory proposes two things. First, that the presbyters as the original rulers of the church shared the apostolic authority and honor. Second, administration under the bishop should still incorporate the counsel of the presbyters on the basis of the apostolic collegiality. Harnack therefore suggests “the elders were ruling body while the bishops and deacons were liturgical leaders and administrators employed by them.”⁵¹

Lightfoot and the Johannine Theory

According to Bishop Lightfoot, “The early tradition points to St. John as being instrumental in establishing the Episcopal institution in Asia Minor.”⁵² If this argument is accepted, it invalidates any previous claims, that monarchical Episcopacy is a second century development. Lightfoot bases his arguments on Ignatius’ letter to the Trallians and the Ephesians.

It is therefore necessary, whatsoever things ye do, to do nothing without the bishop. And be ye subject to the presbytery.⁵³

Wherefore it is fitting that ye also should run together in accordance with the will of the bishop who by God’s appointment rules over you...your justly renowned presbytery being worthy of God, is fitted as exactly to the bishop as the strings are to the harp.⁵⁴

This argument based on Ignatius, not only attributes the probable beginning to John, but also reveals the existence of a systematic organizational structure endorsed by the apostolic tradition. Lightfoot’s argument would support the theory that bishop, presbyters and deacons had varied functions. Expressions such as ‘rules over you’ and ‘fitted to you’ from the above quotation is indicative of Episcopal supremacy.

Dr. Burton and the Apostolic Theory

Dr. Edward Burton in his book ‘The Apostolic Fathers’ suggests that the Apostles were responsible for the development of Episcopal monarchical system. His arguments are based on the letters of Ignatius to the six churches. Burton adds:

The Apostles had also zealous companions who assisted them in their ministry and who were placed by them over the churches in different countries. We have seen the Ephesian converts were committed by Paul to Timothy and those in Crete to Titus. Luke appears to have resided for some time at Philippi and Mark was sent by Peter to watch over the flock in Alexandria.⁵⁵

This tradition is also confirmed by Clement in his first letter to the Corinthians, chapter XLII and chapter XLIV.

The apostles have preached the Gospel to us from the Lord Jesus; Jesus from God. Christ therefore was sent forth by God and the apostles by Christ. Both these appointments, then, were made in an orderly way, according to the will of God...And thus preaching through the countries and cities, they appointed the first fruits [of their labors] having proved them by the Spirit, to be bishops and deacons of those who should afterwards believe.⁵⁶

Clement of Rome, not only confirmed that it was the practice of the apostles to appoint successors to their ministry but also the clear distinctions that existed between office of the bishop, presbyters and deacons.

Jerome's Theory of Heresy

Jerome is of the opinion that historically, both bishop and presbyters had a common call, status and apostolic authority but admits that the former is administratively superior. This is evident in Jerome's 'Dialogue against the Luciferians', where he stated, "without the ordination and bishop's license neither the presbyter nor deacon has the power to baptize"⁵⁷. He viewed monarchical episcopacy as an ecclesiastical solution to a historical problem, mainly in arresting heresy. This concept has been clearly elucidated in his document 'Against the Jovinians'. To Jerome, "bishop, priest (presbyter) and deacons are not honorable distinctions but names of offices."⁵⁸ This is very much in line with the Reformation understanding. In arguing for apostolic succession, Jerome concluded that, "the blessedness of a bishop, priest (presbyter) or deacon does not lie in the fact that they are bishops priests (presbyters) or deacons but in their virtues which their names and offices imply."⁵⁹ To Jerome, the character of the person holding office was far more important than the dignity of post itself. In other words the dignity of the post was dependent upon the

character of the occupant. It is in this context that Jerome viewed the collegiality of the bishops and presbyters as being common.

The Theory of a Jewish Prototype

A further proposal based on the writings of Early Church fathers like Cyprian, Hippolytus and Tertullian, suggests monarchical episcopatism is of a Jewish origin and shares commonality with the Levitical Priesthood. In this case the bishop is often referred to as the High Priest and the presbyters and deacons as the members of the Levitical Priesthood. Cyprian, being an ardent proponent of this understanding, taught that disobedience to the bishop is equivalent to the 'sin against Korak'. Cyprian had four reasons to believe so:

- 1) That the bishop had prerogative and control over the church, which characterized the High Priestly function.
- 2) The concept of territorial boundary and demarcation practiced in Episcopal ministry is understood to be analogous with the Levitical ministerial system.
- 3) The right to maintenance through offering is seen to be a replication of the Levitical system.
- 4) Ordination of a bishop is understood in sacramental terms corresponding to the consecration of a High Priest. Both the Apostolic ministry and the Levitical High Priesthood, Cyprian says, are characterized by an endowment of divine grace.

The above four positions of Cyprian have been strongly criticized by modern scholars. In the case of his first argument, as Benson notes, "Although disobedience to the bishop is the sin of disobedience to the High Priest, yet the bishop is not portrayed as surrounded first by the priests, and secondly by the deacon Levites."⁶⁰ Again most scholars disagree with Cyprian's second argument, saying, a literal interpretation would only lead to implications inconsistent with the New Testament teaching on priesthood. His third argument would imply not just the superiority of the bishop but the equality shared within the three-fold ministry. As for the fourth argument, it is inconsistent with history. Contrary to High Priesthood, laity played an active role in the appointment of the bishop. "It was they who by the aspiration of God, addressed to him the call to enter on the inheritance of that priesthood and dispensation of that grace. On them rested also the responsibility and duty of withdrawing from him and his administration if he were a sinner."⁶¹ Although Cyprian's argu-

ments are not theologically consistent and cohesive, nevertheless taking into account the Jewish historical background of Christianity, the Jewish influences on Christian spirituality and the existence of the very many Jewish symbolism in Christianity, one could understand and appreciate his effort to theorize in Jewish terms.

The Theory of Pauline Origin

This theory suggests, the origin of the monarchial Episcopal system stemmed out of Paul's assigning of Timothy and Titus to be in charge of congregations. But, some scholars argue that Timothy and Titus were never accorded the Episcopal title. Yet it may be noted that both of them assumed and functioned with monarchial Episcopal right.

The Asiatic Theory

According to the Asiatic theory, Episcopal monarchism had its beginning in Asiatic churches due to easy acceptance of the concept. Some scholars attribute this effort to John who was ministering in Ephesus. This opinion also suggests that the seven angels spoken of in John's Revelation, is in fact a reference to seven bishops. "One person was put over each of them who is called by John the Angel of his respective church."⁶² This theory compels one to believe that John's ministry focused strongly on administration and thereby instituted leaders with Episcopal function. As Dr. Edward Burton, says:

In one sense therefore, there were several bishops or overseers in a church, for every presbyter might have borne that name; but as soon as the system became general, which was established in the seven Asiatic churches, and which we have seen to have been adopted also at Antioch, and Rome and Alexandria, of selecting one man to superintend the church, the term bishop was limited to this one superintendent of the whole body.⁶³

Another evidential support for this theory could be found in Polycarp's letters, where he stated that, he received his office through the direct assignment by John. The theory also asserts that the bishops did form a connecting link between the apostolic age and the future church. The laying on of hands then became an essential expression symbolizing apostolic continuity.

Theory of Jewish Family Structure

The most recent study on monarchical Episcopatism attempts to associate it with the concept of Jewish family structure. It presupposes the fact that the Jewish family administration concept had a strong influence on the Early Church, especially in the context of house churches. The theory further elucidates that the host of the house church could have been identified as the overseer and the elders were leaders of the Christian community in general.

Therefore it has been suggested, the heads of households came to have supervisory responsibilities for the churches, which met in their houses, and that these were the bishops of the early church. Further, it has been suggested as elders in the Jewish community, were not synagogue officials but community leaders, so too elders were community not church officials.⁶⁴

The theory offers two suggestions:

- First, that the origin of the Episcopal system is derived from the Jewish family structure.
- Second, that the bishop is a church official but the presbyters were community leaders.

While the second suggestion is acceptable, the first, may pose some contradiction with the system suggested by Paul in Titus 1:5. Here Paul is talking of the appointment of overseers on the basis of good morals and Christian qualities and does not allude to any automatic assumption of office, on the basis of just being the host of a house church.

Edward Benson - Monarchical Episcopacy a Roman Origin

Edward Benson suggests that monarchical Episcopatism is a development of the Roman see. He suggests, by comparing the functions performed by the Roman bishop and the monarchical Episcopal system, one could notice the synonymy. The functions that the Roman bishop was already performing included he being the “preacher in his church, the chief instructor. Again he was the principal arbitrator in disputes. As to morals and discipline, whether clerical or lay, he was Judge in Christ’s stead of disqualifications from communion and propriety of restoration, suitability for any office.”⁶⁵ The Roman Catholic Church in retaining

Roman supremacy and Petrine primacy uses this argument. But most scholars agree that the West probably borrowed the idea from the East.

A General Conclusion

From the above analysis and available evidences, one may suggest monarchical Episcopacy could have had its humble beginning during the apostolic era. The distinct nature of the presbytery and Episcopal office and its unique nature in terms of status is also made obvious. It was the Episcopal office however, which seems to have had prerogative to exercise administrative and spiritual authority over and above the presbytery and deacons. Even Jerome and Chrysostom who would argue for a synonymy in usage of the terms, bishop and presbyter do agree that ordination was the sole prerogative of the bishop. Incidentally, only in Jerome do we find a single statement that a universal decree existed exhorting the establishment of episcopalism. "It was decreed all the world over that one chosen out of the presbyters should be set over the rest, whose office it should be to take the whole care of the church."⁶⁶ If one agrees with Jerome, that heresy (specifically in reference to the Corinthian problem of leadership crisis) was the contributing factor for the institutionalization of Episcopal monarchism, one must also agree that the office of a bishop according to monarchical Episcopalism developed out of a historical need and without a sacramental character. Understanding of episcopacy according to the Ignatian theory or Jerome's theory, both would validate an apostolic beginning and succession. Succession here is understood as succession of responsibility rather than authority. I believe, historically the episcopate was allowed to be apostolic and above the presbytery in dignity and jurisdiction only for practical and administrative purposes, rather than arbitrary exercise of authority. Churches of today that subscribe to the monarchical Episcopal system, need to carefully gauge and reassert the role of Episcopal leadership in conformance with the apostolic ministry, which really is the 'Word and Sacrament'.

Summary

- 1) Episcopal monarchism developed from the apostolic age with the Apostles appointing leaders to take charge of the churches they established.
- 2) Episcopal ministry therefore has an apostolic continuity.
- 3) The office of the bishop and the presbyters were distinct from each other. The bishop had the official right to over see while

the presbyters (elders) were elderly churchmen who had general oversight over the church.

- 4) Apostolic succession has been transmitted through the laying on of hands from the apostolic time: succession of responsibility and function rather than authority and power.
- 5) The term Episcopal monarchism does not denote the element of over lording but one of service and fulfillment of the functions elucidated in the scriptures and explained by the early church fathers, which is namely: Word and Sacrament.
- 6) Whatever the cause may be for developing the hierarchical Episcopal system, it is clear that the objective was to divide up the task between the bishop, presbyters and deacons for effective ministration.
- 7) The Episcopate is functionally a spiritual office rather than administrative involvement.
- 8) The bishop serves in office based on the call of the church and leaves when the church recommends so.

¹The New Catholic Encyclopedia, Volume 1 (New York : McGraw Hill Book Company, 1967), 695.

²Ibid.

³The Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Volume 1 (Leicester, Inter-Varsity Press, 1980), 199-200.

⁴Ibid., 200.

⁵Lightfoot, J.B. The Apostolic Fathers, Part One, Volume 2, St. Clement of Rome (London : Macmillan and Company, 1890), 293.

⁶Stevenson. J., ed. A New Eusebius (London : S.P.C.K, 1983), 12.

⁷Lightfoot, J.B. The Apostolic Fathers, Part One, Volume 2, op. cit., The Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians, 120.

⁸Ibid., 120.

⁹Ibid., 135.

¹⁰Ibid., 133.

¹¹Kleist, James. trans. Ancient Christian Writers, The Epistle of Clement of Rome and St. Ignatius of Antioch (Maryland : Newman Bookshop, 1946), 93.

¹²Lightfoot, J.B. The Apostolic Fathers, Part Two , Volume 2, St. Ignatius and St. Polycarp (London : Macmillan, 1897), 40.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid., 43.

¹⁵Ibid., 121.

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- ¹⁶Ibid., 154.
- ¹⁷Ibid., 310.
- ¹⁸Kliest, James. trans., op. cit., 69-70.
- ¹⁹Ibid., 70-71.
- ²⁰Stevenson, J. ed., op. cit., Ignatius to the Philadelphians, 48.
- ²¹Ibid., Tertullian, 183.
- ²²Halton, Thomas. *The Church - Message of the Fathers, Volume 4*, (Wilmington : Michael Glazier, 1985), 104.
- ²³Benson, W. Edward. *Cyprian - His Life - His Time - His Work* (London : Macmillan and Company, 1897), 32.
- ²⁴Ibid., 32.
- ²⁵Ibid., 39.
- ²⁶Ibid., 34.
- ²⁷Roberts, Alexander and Donaldson, James. ed., *Ante Nicene Fathers, Volume 5*, Hippolytus, Cyprian, Caius, Novatian (New York : Charles Scribner and Sons, 1907), 305.
- ²⁸Stevenson, J. ed., op. cit., 258.
- ²⁹Ibid., Cyprian (Ep. XVII : 1-3), 233.
- ³⁰Ibid., *The Unity of the Catholic Church*, 244.
- ³¹Schaff, Philip and Wace, Hendry. ed., *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Volume 6, Letters and Selected Works of Jerome* (Michigan : Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1957), 288.
- ³²Ibid., 288.
- ³³Ibid., 288.
- ³⁴Ibid., 288.
- ³⁵Ibid., 144.
- ³⁶Stevenson. J. ed., op. cit., 307.
- ³⁷Schaff, Philip and Wace, Hendry ed., *Volume 6, op. cit., Against Jovinians*, 372.
- ³⁸Ibid., *Dialogue Against Luciferians*, 324.
- ³⁹Ibid., 324.
- ⁴⁰Stevenson, J. ed., op. cit., *Canons of the Council of Elvira*, 305.
- ⁴¹Ibid., *Canons of the Council of Ancyra*, 312.
- ⁴²Schaff, Philip and Wace, Hendry. ed., *Volume 14, The Seven Ecumenical Councils* (Michigan : Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1956), 38.
- ⁴³Ibid., *The Council of Constantinople (A.D. 381)*, 176.
- ⁴⁴Ibid., 273.
- ⁴⁵Ibid., 285.
- ⁴⁶Ibid., 290.
- ⁴⁷Ibid., 557.

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- ⁴⁸Ibid., 563.
- ⁴⁹Ibid., 564.
- ⁵⁰Halton, Thomas. *op. cit.*, 97-98.
- ⁵¹The Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Volume 1, *op. cit.*, 200.
- ⁵²Lightfoot, J.B. *The Apostolic Fathers, Part 2, Volume 2, op. cit., Ignatius to the Trallians*, 169.
- ⁵³Roberts, Alexander and Donaldson, James. ed., *Ante Nicene Fathers, Volume 1, Justin Martyr and Ireaneus* (Buffalo :Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887), 66.
- ⁵⁴Ibid., 50.
- ⁵⁵Burton, Edward. *op. cit.*, 7.
- ⁵⁶Roberts, Alexander and Donaldson, James, ed., *Ante Nicene Fathers, Volume 1, op. cit.*, 16.
- ⁵⁷Schaff, Philip and Wace, Hendry. *The Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Volume 6, op. cit.*, 324.
- ⁵⁸*Op. cit.*, 372.
- ⁵⁹Ibid., 373.
- ⁶⁰Benson, W. Edward. *op. cit.*, 35.
- ⁶¹Ibid., 37
- ⁶²Burton, Edward. *op. cit.*, 8.
- ⁶³Ibid., 8-9
- ⁶⁴Hawthorne, Gerald F., Martin, Ralph P., and Reid, Daniel G. *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, (Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 603.
- ⁶⁵Benson, Edward. *op. cit.*, 32.
- ⁶⁶Burton, Edward. *op. cit.*, 225.