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Book Review

The Original Bishops
Office and Order in the First Christian Communities
Alistair C. Stewart
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How were the earliest Christian churches organised? This historically-framed question has attracted much attention over the years because of the sense that if we could discern New Testament teaching and early church practice on this subject, then we would know how churches 'should' be organised today. And maybe so. But in this major new contribution to the subject, drawing together many years' research on primary texts and a range of biblical and patristic investigations, Alistair Stewart eschews that larger theological-hermeneutical-ecclesiological project, and settles instead for a probing historically-orientated account of what went on, at least in so far as we can tell. One headline is: we cannot tell as much as is often claimed. Along the way there are many other headlines too.

This is a rewarding and carefully argued book. I shall return briefly at the end to the broader questions about ecclesiology today that Stewart himself only touches on in passing, mainly in his short final conclusion. In the spirit of reviewing the book actually written rather than constantly turning to matters that interest the reviewer, I shall focus this review on the main historical claims made here. I need to say as clearly as possible that the historical investigation Stewart offers is thorough, wide-ranging, and patiently attentive to as wide as possible a range of sources, counter-interpretations and areas where one has to conclude that we do not know what we might like to know. A review either has to track these meticulous engagements with examples and the reporting of multiple categories, or assures the reader that they are there, and then risk undoing some of the good work by brutally simplifying the case that is made. With some misgivings, I choose the latter path, abandoning in the process many pages of an earlier draft of this review that was becoming as complex as the book itself.

Here then are the historical claims that emerge. In Chapter 1, 'On *Episkopoi* and *Presbyteroi*' (11-53), Stewart elegantly dismantles the standard scholarly notion that the two terms are synonymous in early Christian texts, including the New Testament, and argues instead for overlapping but distinct meanings. In particular, it is the federation of churches in one city that creates the need for individual leaders of (house-based) churches to function together in city-wide gatherings. The leader of each individual congregation was an *episkopos*. However, churches would co-ordinate their work across the city (particularly, he later argues, in economic terms),

and thus when they met together, *kata polin* ('according to/with respect to the city'), these leaders functioned as, and were known as, *presbyteroi*. A strength of this chapter is its persuasive exegesis of Acts 20 and Titus 1, two planks of the traditional argument for synonymy. Acts 20 has Paul call for the presbyteroi of Ephesus (20:17) and then address them as episkopoi eleven verses later: for Stewart this is because they gather as presbyteroi and yet each is also, in his own church, an episkopos. Titus 1:5 has Paul urging Titus to appoint presbyteroi kata polin, which Stewart reads as referring to a role of city-wide elder, and clarifies that each of them is to fulfil the qualities required of an episkopos (1:7), precisely because that is what each appointee to the city-wide eldership already is. With the abandonment of a theory of synonymy between the two terms episkopos and presbyteros, we lose also the supporting evidence of individual churches having collective leadership. Stewart suggests we thus have no evidence that there ever was a stage where individual churches had collective leadership.

Chapter 2 turns to an important building block of the overall argument, concerning 'The Economic Functions of Episkopoi and Diakonoi' (55-119). The fundamental point is easy to summarise: the primary function of an episkopos was economic. This arose from a nexus of issues relating to the practice of celebrating the eucharistic meal (a full meal, in earliest times) in a household. Some supporting evidence comes from the notion of an episkopos of an association – a Graeco-Roman voluntary assembling for some business or trade purpose. This is not fully conclusive, though Stewart notes that some of the lack of fit between church use of the term and commercial use may be due to the fact that 'for a Christian group, the true head of the organization is Christ, and so although an office may have day-to-day charge of a Christian group, that does not make him the true head' (68). Here, and in general throughout, Stewart argues against the competing argument that the synagogue provides the foundation from which church structure emerged. An analysis of the similar economic function of the diakonos, strictly a tangent to the book's overall case, rounds out the chapter.

Chapter 3 then tackles 'Presbyters in Early Christian Communities' (121-85). The conclusion here is not new: in essence, 'presbyters' who were not 'kata polin' (i.e. in local terms episkopoi), but were 'presbyters' in one local congregation, were elders in the non-title-bearing sense of esteemed elder figures of the congregation, or (in practice, usually) patrons. Stewart holds this relatively familiar position in balance with (a) the earlier claim about city-wide presbyters being different, so that the 'esteemed elder' view relates instead to 1 Timothy for example, and (b) the point that the supporting Hellenistic literature (rather than Jewish literature) which does indeed use presbyteros this way in connection with patrons of associations, ends up referring to a relatively stable and identifiable group of people, even if not technically a description of a fixed 'office'.

Chapter 4, 'Presbyters and *Episkopoi* in Emerging Christian Communities' (187-298) is the longest, most detailed, and most willing chapter of all to confess the limits of knowledge. It is an attempt to examine the evidence for monepiscopacy in all the Christian communities for which we have evidence, although frequently it turns out that the evidence is partial or insufficient for firm conclusions, at least once one has stripped away the previous positions that Stewart has already effectively challenged in earlier chapters. Due to those earlier challenges, the term 'monepiscopacy' itself is used by Stewart to refer simply to 'a system in which an

episkopos has responsibility for more than one congregation and has subordinate ministers in those congregations' (ix). It makes no sense on Stewart's reconstruction to reserve the term for a system of one single *episkopos* being in charge, since he has demonstrated the lack of evidence for any other (i.e. plural) leadership scheme. Chapter 4 then works patiently through the evidence, with particularly lengthy discussions of Jerusalem and Ignatius, the latter of which turns out to be the case where Stewart believes we can know least. The end result is a 'very partial and hypothetical account' (298), though earlier alternative accounts tended to achieve their confidence through building too much on slender foundations. Also, of course, the rise of the monepiscopate in these terms, with presbyters '*kata polin*' representing the *(mon)episkopos* in the individual communities, brings us to the three-fold order, probably widespread before the early third century.

Chapter 5 attempts to probe the reasons behind the narrative (partially) reconstructed in the previous chapter: 'The Causes of Monepiscopacy' (299-352). It begins with a brief summary of the argument thus far (300-309) that monepiscopacy generally emerges as the centralisation of federated house-churches in urban areas, with single-church episcopacy remaining far longer in rural areas (and it is in fact relatively easy to track on-going legislation about the roles of rural bishops in succeeding centuries). Chapter 5 then devolves into a brief comparison of this narrative with standard theories about why early church structure took the form it did – typically in terms of the merging of various systems, or 'institutionalisation' as charismatic appointment descended into structure, or 'scholasticisation' whereby teaching pressures and the refutation of heresy in particular forced unanimity and then unity. Stewart contests all three alternative narratives, as either forcing data into fitting their assumptions, or simply relying on problematic narratives in the first place. In the end, he concludes that we do not know why centralisation occurred, but that there were probably elements of the refutation of heresy, and that this may also have added teaching dimensions to the house-holder's management of the Eucharistic meal, hence the emergence of teaching centred in the *episkopos*. Various addenda are considered: the little we know about concerns over succession, formal ordination, female leadership, and so forth. Disarmingly, concerning why it all happened, he concludes: 'ultimately, we are in ignorance; consequently, the claim of the present work is simply to have clarified the area about which we are ignorant: the extent of centralization among federations prior to the emergence of *monepiskopoi*'. (352)

A final postscript offers (very) brief reflections on where all this leaves us. Stewart's answer is: almost certainly in a church that is not organised like the earliest churches (whether we are in presbyteral or monepiscopal ecclesiologies), and then again at some remove from knowing what the doctrinal significance of that fact might be, since much will depend on how one thinks the nature of the church is or is not supposed to develop, or how significant the historic reception of patterns of ministry is understood to be. In a prophetic final call, he argues that church order is probably not the key topic arising anyway. Rather, the diaconate as assisting the bishop in administering the economic functions of *episkopē* is key, and the resultant practice should be the Eucharist as a focus for implementing justice and, in particular, brokering God's kingdom to the marginalised. As we noted earlier: 'for a Christian group, the true head of the organisation is Christ' (68).

This is a book marked by wide learning and rigorous integrity in its handling of diverse and disparate sources, as well as clear-headedness concerning the ways in which ecclesiological convictions frequently blur the lines of historical data. It is a compelling and deeply challenging clarification both of how little we know, but also how clearly we should be thinking about the little that we do know. Its central historical claim about the rise of monepiscopacy through (unexplained) centralisation of federated house-hold churches in urban settings should carry the day. That the purpose of church order is for the sake of those without the benefits of personal charisma or independent patronage is a prophetic reminder to church leaders of all persuasions. This is a magnificent achievement, and I commend it whole-heartedly.