Alistair C. Stewart

*The Original Bishops: Office and Order in the First Christian Communities*


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In this closely argued and exegetically analytical study, Alistair C. Stewart (who, publishing as Stewart-Sykes, has an impressive record as a patristic scholar) presents a vigorous rebuttal of what he describes as the “consensus” position concerning the origin of the threefold order of *episkopoi* (bishops), *presbyters* (elders), and deacons. The consensus starts with the presupposition that the earliest form of leadership in the local church was collegial, its members usually labeled “presbyters,” a model widely assumed to be based on that of the synagogue; initially the term *episkopos* was synonymous, or closely so, with *presbyteros*, although in some accounts originating in Hellenistic models, but it came to be applied to the single leader who emerged from the earlier college. In a careful analysis of the variability in terminology used in scholarship, Stewart notes that *monepiskopos* (or monarchical episcopacy/bishop) is applied sometimes to this single local leader, sometimes only to the figure who emerges subsequently, who has jurisdiction over a number of communities within an area.

The model arose out of the effort to make sense of the apparently inconsistent evidence, first of the New Testament, then of the witnesses for the early part of the second century. Chief among the former would be Acts 14:23 and 20:17, 28; Phil 1:1; and Titus 1:5–7, on which many have based the equivalence of “presbyter” and “episkopos,” especially when
set alongside 1 Tim 3:1–13 and 5:17. The difficulties it addresses are compounded by Ignatius’s vigorous defense and location of bishops, elders (or the presbytery), and deacons, by Polycarp’s self-description, by Did. 15:1, and by 1 Clement, as well as by subsequent sources.

While some might despair or appeal to the now-prevalent mantra of initial “diversity,” the relative consistency of terminology, and the eventual emergence of a mutually recognized model, propel the effort to provide a single narrative of origins and development. Stewart’s effort to do so entails displaying the multiple weaknesses in the “consensus” model, as well as the actual fissures both within it and among other attempts to replace it; these weaknesses include inconsistency of terminology, poorly evidenced prior assumptions, and failures in a consistent reading of the sources. Fundamental for Stewart is, on the one hand, the frailty of any evidence for presbyterial governance of the synagogue, alongside the strong attestation for episkopos as fulfilling an economic function in a variety of associational and civic contexts; on the other hand, he traces many of the problems to a failure by scholars to distinguish sufficiently between the single community, based on the household, and the “community in a place,” namely, the federation of such household communities. In his alternative model, the economic responsibility for the administration of the shared meal, and associated distribution of goods, was foundational and lay in the household community, with the episkopos often but not always the householder. When gathered together within a single urban context, the representatives of each household, the episkopoi, might be known as presbyters (as implied by “the elders in every town” of Titus 1:5); only in time did that federal body generate a preeminent elder (or bishop) for the city, for reasons that Stewart tentatively explores in his conclusion. Where, on occasion, presbyters are found in the household-based community, as in 1 Tim 5:17, these constituted a “patronal group,” not an office; similar patronal groups might exist elsewhere under other names.

Stewart tests his theory with the evidence for Rome, for Corinth, and for Ephesus, before extending it to Alexandria and to the other cities of Greece and Asia Minor, as well as dealing with Jerusalem and with the evidence from further east, such as the Didascalia Apostolorum. He does so through detailed exegesis of the sources and interaction with existing interpretation of them. Inevitably, many will find his exposure of the weaknesses of the consensus more persuasive than some of his reconstruction, particularly, for example, when he largely accepts the hypothesis of an Essene context both for Jesus’s ministry and for the early Jerusalem community. The argument is at times difficult to follow, not least when he combines dismissal of alternative suggestions with his own preferred solution; so wide is his reading that inevitably most readers will have to take on trust both his account of other views and that of the sources from which he argues, although all are available for consultation. Moreover, other targets for unequivocal
dismissal emerge particularly towards the end of the book, including the assumption that the teaching role was integral to the “office” from the start and, even more, any appeal to “charismatic leadership” as an alternative early model. Although Stewart closes by affirming his own role as a historian, hesitant but nonetheless willing to draw “theological” conclusions, it is difficult to avoid a sense that such aversions are rooted in presuppositions that would have merited more examination. Indeed, the book would have benefited from a closer examination of the ideas of office, leadership, authority, and function, both in recent sociological analysis and in the working of ancient society.

Nonetheless, this is an important book; although the evidential gaps of the consensus have been acknowledged in part by many, it successfully demonstrates in a much more sustained way just how damaging both the gaps and the misreading of the sources are. The alternative it offers has much in its favor, even if not all feel that it tells the whole story—and Stewart acknowledges the slender evidence in many situations. Certainly this is a book that should not be ignored by any future study of ministry in the early church, either by historians of the period or by those seeking to make claims for the present.