

## *The Church: Hierarchy and Discipline*

Richard C. Gamble, ThD

*Experience: Professor of Systematic Theology,  
Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary*



In our last lecture, we were just beginning an analysis of some writings that are very difficult for us to interpret, and before I go into more detail as to how these letters have been interpreted and how they should be interpreted, let me mention the reason why it is so very important that we understand this. In the material which we have in the New Testament, it seems that one certain theory is being propounded, that of the idea of deacon and bishop, which can also be translated presbyter, and in the earliest literature we have after that time, especially the letter to the Philippians after Paul, we see a basic continuity. However, as we take a look at Ignatius's epistle, I've mentioned that there are three classes of office bearers mentioned there and that there are three ways of understanding these letters. One, that they are a forgery. Two, that they could be understood in terms of supporting a Presbyterian or Congregational standpoint, and three, that they very clearly teach that the Episcopalian church structure was the one that was being propounded during this time period.

I mentioned in the last lecture that the first option, that the whole thing is a forgery, was the opinion of most of the Reformers, and I quoted Calvin's consideration in the first book of *The Institutes*, that the whole corpus is a forgery. I mention that to remind you that in the sixteenth century (that goes beyond our course now, but it's helpful for us to see this historical background), it was determined that there were a number of pieces of patristic literature which were in fact created in the late Middle Ages and ascribed to the ancient church and used to support specific doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church. The most famous of these is *The Donation to Constantine*, which in the sixteenth century was found to be a great forgery, but that *Donation of Constantine* was used to support the papacy in the late medieval church. So during the sixteenth century, there was sort of an antagonistic feeling between the Protestant and the Roman Catholic churches concerning certain pieces of literature, and because at least in Calvin's mind and Luther's mind this piece of literature strongly

supported episcopalian church government, they concluded that the whole thing was a forgery.

As we look at this from a literary-critical standpoint, we're going to be able to determine that at least the bulk of this corpus, the majority of these letters, are in fact from the second century. However, let me mention—and now we move into new material for this lecture—some important arguments and one simple argument that indicates that those portions which talk about church government could in fact be later interpretations or interpolations, later editions in the text material. The argument follows this reasoning: No other writers in the first and second centuries, including the inspired writers, have uniformly used the words *bishop* and *presbyter* as description of two distinct classes of functionaries in the church—the one higher and the other lower; that is, the bishop is the highest class of church officer, then there is the presbyter which is a lower class. Yet, this distinction is uniformly and systematically made in the epistles of Ignatius. Therefore, it seems, according to those who follow this theory, and by the way, I think this theory has a lot of weight to it, that parts of these epistles were not written by someone who lived in the beginning of the second century. Given the recognized principles of literary criticism, it seems unlikely that these statements that are clearly supporting episcopal church structure are genuine. That's at least how the argument goes.

As mentioned a minute ago, there is a second way that these epistles can be interpreted; that is, that they are consonant with what we would call Presbyterianism or Congregationalism. It's argued that in Ignatius's epistles, one, that the bishop was but the pastor of a single congregation, while two, there's no clear evidence that presbyters were pastors or ministers of the Word. Those who want to argue this way maintain that the bishops are the pastors and that the presbyters are the ruling elders. Yet there are difficulties with this view, however, in that there are other sources of the same time period that maintain that the presbyters were pastors as well. And so to a certain extent, this second way of understanding the Ignatian epistles has to ignore the information of history that is coming from the same time period. So this, too, is a problematic way of interpreting these epistles.

The third view is that Ignatius is propounding the position of what we should call, and this is a technical term, monarchical episcopalian government—monarchical from the word *monarch*, single ruler, episcopalian government. If this viewpoint is taken

then we must say, one, the bishop does appear as the head of a single congregation. Two, that he is called the vicar of Christ and not, as in the later Roman Catholic view, merely the successor of the apostles, and three, that there are no distinctions of order among the bishops, no trace of a primacy. All are fully coordinate vicars of Christ. In them, both the bishops and the presbyters, as it were, there is a sensible, perceptible, omnipresence of Christ in the church. And so given this third view, the Ignatian episcopacy, in short, is a new and a growing institution, not a settled policy of apostolic origin.

What do we make of all of this? In a sense it's a toss-up. There are arguments for and against each one of the various interpretations possible. I think that if we follow the third argument that is supporting episcopalian government, whether we are Episcopalian in our own beliefs or Baptist or Presbyterian, the important part to recognize is that even given the strongest interpretation in favor of the episcopalian system, that system is still radically different from the system which will evolve in the Middle Ages; that is, that there is apostolic succession and a primacy among the bishops. In other words, even if we agree that there is a bishop and under him a presbyter who is also a pastor, and then under those pastors, the deacons, even given that interpretation, it still demonstrates to us that this is a growing system, that it is evolving, and it is certainly not seen in the earliest church time period.

However, for what it's worth, my own position concerning this, and again you're free to disagree with me, that's fine, is that if we understand these things in this way, I would think that I could grant that there is a change beginning in church government. However, I still have a lot of doubt as to the authenticity of those particular passage, and as I've studied the text tradition, which if we had another twenty or thirty years to work together on this course, we could do that in great detail, as I've studied the text tradition, it does seem highly probable given the late date of our surviving manuscripts, that in fact there are interpolations. So I don't lend much credence to this, and I certainly would never grant that this demonstrates from the time of the apostles a monarchical episcopal structure in the church. Rather, I'm firmly against that view, that monarchical episcopacy is established from the beginning. As I do that, I would remind you as I take that position that there are many important scholars who would disagree with me, and so once again, I certainly wouldn't hold you to my position, but I think it's only right and fair that I share how I interpret these important pieces of literature and how it's

helpful for us to understand both sides of the issue as we discuss church government with those who disagree with us.

Moving on historically, we travel from the beginning of the second century, that is the time of Ignatius, through the middle of the third century, and our first observation here as we survey the literature of this time period is that there is beginning certainly to sometimes be an indiscriminate use of different classes to the offices of bishop and presbyter. There were sometimes different classes of office bearers. What we see is that there are some references that do clearly distinguish three offices. Some maintain that there are two offices, and other pieces of literature make it difficult to tell exactly what is being established. What may therefore be concluded is that in the time of Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen, and these are the various authors that we've talked about in this time period, there are distinctions between bishops, presbyters, and deacons, but that these distinctions are not seen to be very great in and of themselves, nor are they constantly observed. A note of caution needs to be added here. What we are discussing was not yet a topic of debate within the church and therefore was not sharply developed. Let me mention that caution again. Without debate, there is no precision in the articulation of doctrine in the history of the church. This is the case in our discussion. For example, as we've been discussing the doctrine of Christ and the doctrine of the Trinity, debate is raging throughout the church. Athanasius is being thrown out of the empire, Origen is being excommunicated, there are hot issues, but especially during this time period, the church is not concerned with these, what they consider at that time, details of church life.

Now, in the twentieth century we have pretty well finished discussion of Christology and the nature of the Trinity, and we're more concerned with these types of issues today. But without debate, there is no precision, and there has been up until this point no great debate. As I mentioned earlier in the most primitive times, in the earliest times of postapostolic Christianity, there were only bishops and deacons—the bishops being the pastors of the church. It seems that in this time period, that is, through the middle of the third century, within what we could call the presbytery or the group of bishops meeting together in a certain geographical location (presbytery is a modern word for that kind of meeting). In that meeting, the president of this group of pastors was gradually called the bishop, while the pastors maintained the title of presbyter.

“Bishop” and “presbyter” were at one time synonymous, and now “bishop” is becoming the technical term for the president of the presbytery. Yet all the writers of this period do use the words *bishop* and *presbyter* indiscriminately at times. Let me mention this again, and this is why I still have doubt concerning the Ignatian epistles. A century after Ignatius, as much as a century and a half after Ignatius, there is this indiscriminate use of the words *bishop* and *presbyter* for the word *pastor*. The great pastor of the congregation in a certain town, the great bishop of the town, the great presbyter of the town; these words are being used synonymously during this time period and indiscriminately, so it still seems certain to us that the bishops as president of this presbytery, were not conceived of as a separate class or superior order from the presbyters. To become a bishop required the selection by both the presbytery and the people. To become the president of the presbytery, to become the leader of the group of pastors in a geographical location, required an election by the college of pastors and approbation depending upon the geographical location. Some type of approbation by the people, so that one person who was especially politically powerful in the presbytery could not have himself elected president of that presbytery. It required the approbation, the approval of the people who sometimes weren’t as influenced by any one pastor. That’s what we see developing at this time period.

Moving on chronologically to the time of Cyprian of Carthage; that is, ten to twelve years after the middle of the third century, about 250 to 258, we observe a new development. Here there is little question that Cyprian demonstrates a distinction between presbyter and bishop. It’s also true that in a certain sense Cyprian maintains that there is a superiority of the bishop over the presbyter. Cyprian helps to advance the superiority of the bishop over the presbyter. Cyprian is the first to argue that there is a certain primacy given to Peter over the other disciples, and therefore there is a certain type of primacy of the bishop of Rome over the other bishops. So here we may observe that at the time of Cyprian, there was certainly a fixed president of the presbytery known as the bishop. Yet there is no evidence that he maintained that the bishops received some type of a divine appointment that made them superior to the presbyters or that there were any church functions which the presbyters were incapable of doing and that the bishops alone were capable of performing.

Cyprian himself tells us that he did nothing without the consent of his presbytery, and that when certain grave matters were decided, then he acted with the consent of the people as well. Therefore, although we certainly see the outline of coming ecclesiastical structures taking form, there is not by the time of Cyprian a system of government which we would describe as the present Roman Catholic one. Now it cannot be denied, however, that the Roman Catholic system of the papacy did develop. Assuming that the system is not that of earliest Christianity or even Christianity up until the time of Cyprian, let's begin to see how the bishop of Rome became known as the pope.

Still in the time of Cyprian, the text of Matthew 16:18, "You are Peter and upon this rock I will build my church," was used against Cyprian by Stephen, who was the bishop of Rome, and this was concerning a dispute on baptism. What was the dispute on baptism? Just add some interesting detail. The dispute concerned this: whether baptism performed by a heretic was a lawful baptism. Stephen maintained that as long as a baptism was done in the terms of the Trinity, no rebaptism should be done. Cyprian argued that all baptisms done by heretics were invalid and, therefore, all of the persons baptized by heretics must be rebaptized. That was the issue. And Stephen in his attempt to gain clout over Cyprian uses the argument of Matthew 16:18 against him, saying, Now look, Cyprian, I am the foremost bishop. You listen to me and you follow my advice because I'm the follower of Peter here. But it wasn't until later, the year is 382, that Damasus or Damasus of Rome used that argument of Matthew 16:18 to establish clear claims of primacy.

Certain historical events contributed to this development. For example, the church was in more than one crisis as it comes out of the tailspin of Arianism. Now we know about the Arian problem. We know all about his theology, but not only were theological problems evident during the discussion and debate surrounding Arianism, but what we would call administrative problems were apparent as well. Anarchy was running rampant through the church in terms of properly disciplining heretics such as the Arians. And it seemed necessary for the church given this crisis, and we know about the theological crisis, but theology and practical application are always going hand in hand, so this theological crisis produced another type of very practical crisis; that is, how are these Arians who have been excommunicated, who want to come back into the church, how are they brought back into the church? We've talked about the problem of the



lapsed. That was a problem that was ironed out and eventually became no problem as persecution terminated, but how about the continuing problem of Arians and the continuing problem of those who have become excommunicated?

The church in general decided that it would be helpful if a collection of the various synodical decisions were made, those decision made at various synods, those churches in a certain geographic area, if a collection were made of the various acts of those councils and synods so that a body of ecclesiastical or church legislation could be erected to help solve the problem and provide in a sense a dictionary of church discipline for pastors. That's a great idea. As you remember from our earlier sketches of history, especially between the years 325 and 381, there were many synods called. Some were called to counteract the synod that was being held elsewhere. Especially in the Western part of the church, the rulings of synods were not enjoying very high popularity as being authoritative in matters of doctrine and church life. And so the burning practical question was where the proper interpretation of these difficult Scripture passages was to come from if the local synods could be of such disagreement on interpretation.

The answer to that burning practical question is going to be easy to be found. In the West, the Roman church, well the Roman city anyway, was perhaps the most important city in the empire. Therefore, because the church had adopted the boundaries of the Roman Empire's provinces, therefore, the church in the city of Rome would be considered the most important church. Since Peter was the founder of the Roman church and Rome was the capital of the Western empire, then this bishop, Damasus of Rome, 366 to 384, is going to see that his bishopric was the most important one in the Western world, and as different bishops would request advice from him, would request information from him, he began to adopt the same, what we call epistolary form, the same letter form as did the emperor. Let me say that again. The city of Rome is the most important city in the Roman Empire. The city of Rome could claim Peter as the founder of that church. It is the only church founded by an apostle in the West; therefore, for the Western church, Rome is the main city and the main church. This development is a natural progression given a crisis of authority.

We can turn to the main city, the main church, for answers to our questions, and let's face it, in twentieth-century America, we do much the same thing. Whether you are Presbyterian or a Baptist or an Anglican, there are certain cities that are considered our

capital cities. There are certain churches which are considered oftentimes the most important churches in our denomination or in our fellowship, and that certain pastors, although technically equal with all other pastors, they are perceived as] much more important than their other pastors. So we understand that in the twentieth century.

The same thing is developing in this fourth century. This Damasus was a very, very wise pastor. He could put all of this information together, and we see that then in his surviving letters. Now, once again, put ourselves in that fourth-century context and relate that to the twentieth century. If you were to write me a letter after this course thanking me profusely for the great wisdom that I've given to you, ha, or, of course, probably blaming me for my idiocy. As you would write this letter to me, you would write a letter, "Dear Dr. Gamble, I loved your course. It was a great course," and probably sign it with a certain type of ending that is common among Christians. For example, "sincerely in Christ, love in Christ, love in the fellowship of Christ," something like that. There's a form that we follow as we write letters to each other. If you were to write a letter to your mother, you would write it in a different way. It would be more personal. It wouldn't be so formal. You know your mother; you love your mother, and you could [write in an informal way]. What would happen if you wrote to the president of the United States? Right now the president's name is Reagan. You wouldn't write a letter, "Dear Ronnie." You would address him more formally. That's common courtesy. If you were living in the fourth century and wanted to write a letter to the emperor, you wouldn't call him by his first name. You would write in a certain formal fashion, and he would write back in a formal fashion.

What Damasus started to do was to respond to letters in the same formal fashion as the emperor himself did. So although they were brothers in Christ, Damasus began assuming for himself the prerogatives of the emperor as the head of the church. As there is one head of the state, so Damasus thought, Well, there should be one head of the church, and that main church is the church in Rome, and I am the head of that church in Rome; therefore, I should be considered the main pastor of Western Christianity. That's the evolution up until this point.

Let's move ahead chronologically. We're right now at the end of the life of Augustine. Remember his birth and death dates? Say them out loud right now. That's right, 354 to 430. You have it memorized. The next person who represents, in a sense, the



beginning of the papacy is the first person that we call “pope,” and his name is Leo I. Pope Leo I marks a time when Rome stands as the complete authority in the Western church. It was during his time period, 440 to 461, that the Western emperor, whose name is Valentinian III, decrees that all bishops in the Western part of the empire were to submit to the authority of the pope upon paying of civil punishment.

It's Leo I who plays an extremely important role in the new development of the Roman Empire. As I mentioned during the crisis of Arianism there was a crisis of authority, so there is a new crisis in this fifth century. I've mentioned this other date once or twice before: the year is 410. What happens in the year 410? Can you remember? That's right, it's the first sack of the city of Rome. The Roman Empire is dissolving. During the time period of Leo I, 440—this is thirty years after the first sack of Rome—and from 410 on the Roman Empire begins to dissolve more and more rapidly, and it's Leo I who plays an important role in keeping the city of Rome from being attacked by another famous person in the history books, a fellow called Attila the Hun. You remember him? He was your first-grade teacher. And oftentimes Attila the Hun is vilified as the most horrendous person. We still call people in the twentieth century, we are reminded of our enemies as yes, he's like Attila the Hun. Attila the Hun was a real person, and he was someone who ruthlessly sacked the city of Rome—murdering, destroying, and stealing.

The city of Rome had been sacked a number of times and stripped of all wealth. The churches were plundered; everything was plundered, and the emperor was helpless against his hordes. And Leo is the one who goes out to represent what we would call civilization to the barbarians. It's Leo who can come with authority, not the authority of the sword of Rome now, but with the authority of the Word of God, and come to Attila with bravery and plead with Attila, who is not a Christian, to have mercy on the city. And so that's what Leo does. It does make sense, doesn't it, that the emperor would give to Leo this political power? It was a matter of politics here. As the empire crumbles, the emperor is glad to give to Leo supreme spiritual authority in all the West. That played an important practical or pragmatic value that was valuable to the city of Rome itself to keep many people from being massacred, and Leo's direct pleas with Attila save many, many lives. So that's one of the reasons why Leo moves into this position as being known honestly as the pope.

The pope, by the way, is a translation of the word that we use for papa, and in Italian the pope is actually known as papa, a word familiar with us. Pope is sort of a strange word, but papa means our father. He is the father of Western Christianity, and that helps us to understand the origins of that word *pope*. It just means papa.

Pope Leo, 440 to 461, took the idea of being a follower of Peter quite literally. In Leo's mind (this is very different from twentieth-century evangelical thinking, so enter into this time period), as Leo spoke, he truly believed that Peter was speaking. There was, as far as we can recreate the life of Leo, a merging of identities in Leo's mind. In other words, he believed that somehow Peter lived in him. For those of you of the same age, as many people in their thirties, this is the first Vulcan mind meld for those of you who know the show *Star Trek*. In other words, a complete merging of personality. Leo is responsible for the saying which has achieved such importance for the papacy. Leo said this: "The dignity of Saint Peter is not lacking even in an unworthy heir." Let me say that phrase again. "The dignity of Saint Peter is not lacking even in an unworthy heir." How is that understood? Why is that an important phrase? Leo was a good pastor. He was faithful to his congregation. He saved his congregation tremendous suffering as he had great risk of his own life interceded with Attila the Hun, but Leo was convinced that this dignity, this living in communion with Saint Peter was not just his prerogative but would be the privilege of his successors as well. And so even if there was a pastor of the city of Rome who was quite unworthy of being the head pastor of the city, the fact that the office itself is such a high office, that dignity must be given to that office, even if the person himself is unworthy of that dignity. And that teaching, I must confess, is a hideous one that is going to wreak havoc in the church for the next thousand years.

Our last point concerning the relationship of how the papal church begins to develop is the period of decline in the power of the papal authority in the West after the time of Leo. There is tremendous political unrest, as you can imagine, and concomitant with the breakup of the empire is the breakup of papal authority. If the church has taken on the divisions of the empire, and the main cities of the empire are the main churches of the main cities of the church, then with the demise of the Roman Empire is also a demise of the central authority in the church. And the next pope who was going to be able to reassert Roman authority is the pope by the name of Gregory the Great. Yet, he's not pope until AD 590, and he's pope until 604. He turns his attention now to the barbaric

lands of the West. Remember these barbaric tribes sweep through what we call present-day Europe with the invasion especially of the Visigoths, and it's Gregory the Great who can over a century after the time of Leo once again reassert a Roman authority. It was under Gregory the Great that the Anglo-Saxons of England are converted through the work of the monk Augustine—not the same Augustine of Hippo. This Saint Augustine of Canterbury, of the city of Canterbury, is very important to the conversion of what we will later call the British people.

The Roman Catholic Church considers Gregory one of the four great teachers of the Western church, only second or third to Ambrose, Augustine, and Jerome. Gregory the Great worked to make improvements in church liturgy, and the Gregorian chant, which is important in the Middle Ages, is named after him, although we're not sure that Gregory wrote any of those compositions. But that brings us to the end, the chronological end of this course, which is 600. And so we see the sweeping changes in the development of Roman hierarchy and the development of the papacy in the Roman church.

Let's quickly summarize what we've learned. It seems apparent to me, again without spending much time in the New Testament material which isn't part of this course, that the New Testament teaches two basic functionaries in the church in terms of leadership—the presbyter and the deacon. The earliest patristic literature indicates that presbyter and bishop and pastor were all synonymous terms, and that patristic literature indicates that there were these two types of leading functionaries in the ancient church period.

Then we have the problem with the letters of Ignatius, which seem to teach that there are three different orders—a bishop, who is a pastor and higher than the other pastors who are just called presbyters, and then the deacons. But in the information after Ignatius we still see a slow and gradual development that within the group of pastors (and we can call it by different names) a president of those pastors is elected, and once again, this is common in the twentieth-century American church. We see this in many different denominations as elders or pastors come together in annual or semi-annual assemblies or even quarterly assemblies. Usually a head of that group is elected sometimes for a year and sometimes for a longer time period. We see in the ancient church period that the bishop who is elected president of that presbytery was not elected for life. There was always an

equality among all of the presbyters; in other words, that the bishop because he's bishop is not able to do more things than the presbyter. Rather there is equality and yet there is distinction in function.

Gradually, however, in light of the crisis of Arianism, there is the need for uniformity of teaching and of doctrine and of discipline. How can we have a unified church if in one church heretical baptism, for example, is rebaptized, where in another church, heretical baptism isn't rebaptized? And so there was a cry for uniformity, especially in the West, and with that cry, with that need, so the answer to that need is seen in the Roman church, which is foremost church in terms of being associated with the empire and having Peter as the founder of that church. Then by the time of Leo, we have the claim of complete authority of Leo on the basis of the Scripture passage Matthew 16:18, and that is the beginning of what I would call the papacy. I see Leo as the first pope, as the first person who can truly be called a pope of a Roman church. But once again immediately after Leo, we have the decline of the papacy so that there is in effect no papacy for hundred years with the decline of the Roman Empire. But finally with Gregory the Great, that papacy will once again come to the forefront and be with the church for about nine hundred years—until today—that with Gregory the Great we have that institutional papacy beginning, and that is the reason why we choose the year 600 as the end of the ancient church period and the beginning of the medieval period.

In our next lecture, we'll begin to analyze the relationship between church and state in the ancient church.