
Brian Gleeson CP

Abstract: The author looks to the New Testament for the roots of today’s church leadership by bishops, presbyters (priests), and deacons, and for inspiration for the appropriate exercise of those ministries. His investigation leads him to contrast the familiar and fixed patterns of ordained ministry today with the earliest adaptive patterns of authority and leadership. The data from the Church of the beginnings reveal that ordination and offices as entitlement and empowerment for ministry are unknown, and that a rich variety of ministries emerges and evolves in response to a variety of needs and the leadership of the Holy Spirit. His identification and classification of relevant data lead to ten conclusions for planning, organising and expressing forms of church leadership, both in the present and in the future.

Key Words: holy orders; ordained priesthood; ordained ministry; church leadership; New Testament – apostles; New Testament – ministries

All over the Catholic world today there exists the threefold ordained ministry of bishop, priest, and deacon. This reflects an ancient structure of ministry. So much so that one may tend to take the present structure of ordained ministry for granted, and even assume that Jesus Christ personally and directly set up the three offices. And so when one first learns that none of these ministries, in the exact form in which they exist today, can be found in the NT, it may come as a shock. Even the words ‘pope’ and ‘priest’ (as Christian terms for particular ministers) are nowhere to be found there. Ordained ministry in the Church, in fact, is the outcome of an evolution and a development of patterns of ministry in the NT.

The NT nevertheless remains a valuable source for understanding the roots of ordained ministry, and for inspiration on aspects of church leadership today. This presentation will therefore investigate the light shed on the subject by a survey of relevant NT data, and especially as interpreted by contemporary and respected scholars. It will be done against the background of certain assumptions and presumptions, recognized by scholars today as somewhat naïve and simplistic, of both the Council of Trent and the Second Vatican Council.

A. COUNCIL TEACHINGS

The Council of Trent taught that Jesus ‘ordained’ his apostles priests and bishops at the Last Supper, when he said to them after his action with the bread and wine: ‘Do this in
memory of me.' Aloys Grillmeier, historian of church doctrine and authoritative commentator on article 28 of *Lumen Gentium*, Vatican II’s Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, has claimed: ‘The Council avoided the historical questions of the origins of ecclesiastical offices: the text of the Council had to leave open the details of the historic genesis of the office of priest and deacon and other degrees of orders.’ This is a surprising claim in view of particular assertions of the Council which are difficult, if not impossible, to reconcile with insights from contemporary biblical, historical and theological scholarship. Let me specify the following: - *Lumen Gentium* a.18 states: ‘[Christ] willed that... the bishops should be the shepherds in his Church until the end of the world.’ *Lumen Gentium* a.20 says: ‘...the apostles were careful to appoint successors in this hierarchically constituted society.’ *Lumen Gentium* a.20, citing St Irenaeus, also speaks of ‘...those whom the apostles made bishops...’ *Lumen Gentium* a.21 claims how this happened: ‘...the apostles... by the imposition of hands... passed on to their collaborators the gift of the Spirit...’ *Lumen Gentium* a.20 also claims: ‘They... designated men and ruled that on their death other approved men should take over their ministry.’ Such claims and assertions are not backed by hard evidence.


**Christian leaders are not called ‘priests’**

It is significant that nowhere in the NT are Christian leaders or ministers called ‘priests.’ Nowhere too are such persons compared with Jewish priests. When Hebrews Ch.5 speaks of Jesus as ‘high priest,’ it does so to assert that Christians have no need of the sort of mediation exercised by Jewish priests. For Jesus has done it all, has put an end to Jewish priesthood by the offering of himself as a totally sufficient sacrifice. In the second place, the words ‘holy orders,’ ‘ordain,’ and ‘ordination’ are not found in the original languages of the NT. Moreover, there is much disagreement among scholars about the extent to which the later liturgical practice of ordination corresponds to NT practice and its terminology.

**Christians as a group are priests**

In the NT, Christians as a group, not as individuals, are priests. They are called ‘a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people’ (1 Pt 2:9). Consequently, what we find in the pages of the NT is a complete discontinuity, a complete break, between the Israelite priesthood as it had evolved by the time of Jesus, and the Christian leaders, workers, co-workers and ministers, spoken of in the NT.

**Some implications**

All baptised members of the Church, then, as Christians, share in the priesthood of Jesus. *Lumen gentium* spells out some implications of this: The faithful indeed, by virtue of their royal priesthood share in the offering of the Eucharist. They exercise that priesthood, too, by the reception of the sacraments, by prayer and thanksgiving, by the witness of a holy life, self-denial and active charity’ (LG, a.10). In a nutshell, the priestly People of God as a

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3 They are words written in the 80s or 90s by a disciple of Peter. Cf. Rev 1:5b-6; Rev 5:9b-10; Rev 20:6.
whole are called by God to declare his wonderful deeds by their lives of praise, service, and self-offering (cf. Rom 12:1; Phil 3:3; Heb 9:14: 12:28).

C. MINISTRY IN GENERAL IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

NT evidence
On the question of the origins of Christian ministries of leadership, Gerard Kelly has observed:

The gospels give very little indication of the establishment of any specific form of ministry. Jesus’ own expectations were for the renewal of the House of Israel; there is no indication that he intended to establish any formal ministries - and certainly not the three-fold ministry of bishop-priest-deacon.4 He goes on to remark: 'The evidence from the New Testament is that there was no fixed form of ministry. The diversity of local Churches gave rise to a diversity of ministries.'5

Disagreement on how Christian leaders came to lead
Scholars are not in agreement about the way in which Christian leaders came into being in the early Church. Many nowadays incline to the view that Christian leaders emerged or were appointed in a variety of ways in response to a variety of needs within different Christian communities. The NT reveals e.g., that Paul and Barnabas sometimes appointed local church leaders in particular communities (see e.g. Acts 14:23, which says they ‘appointed elders... in each church’). Others may have been chosen by their local communities.6

The call of Timothy to ministry (1 Tim 4:14; 2 Tim 1:6, 8-14; cf. 1 Tim 5:22)
The ‘imposition of hands’ is mentioned in Acts 6:6; 13:3; 1 Tim 4:14; 2 Tim 1:6 (cf. 1 Tim 5:22). Scholars disagree as to whether in each instance the gesture and its meaning are the same. Certainly it is not a synonym for ordination, for it is used for blessing and healing as well as appointment to ministry. The references in 1 and 2 Timothy, nevertheless, probably refer to the core of a ritual of appointment. It is said that hands are laid by Paul and ‘the council of elders [presbyters]’ (1 Tim 4:14; 2 Tim 1:6). In and through this ritual a gift from God is conferred on Timothy. He is told ‘not to neglect,’ and indeed ‘to rekindle’ the gift of God’ that he has received. This is a gift (grace) for the ministry of the word. It strengthens him to bear public witness to the gospel (2 Tim 1:8-14). However, no mention is made in these texts, or anywhere else in the NT for that matter, of the gift being given to offer sacrifice and to forgive sins.

Deeds of service rather than fixed offices
So open-ended is Christian ministry in the NT that in the early NT literature we are better advised to think and speak of ‘deeds of service’ rather than ‘ministerial offices,’ of persons performing acts of leadership rather than organized structures. This is especially true in the foundational period of the Church up to c.70 AD. To say this is not to deny that there

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4 Gerard Kelly, 'Ordination in the Presbyteral Order: History and Theology,' Australasian Catholic Record 78.3 (July 1996): 261-262. Cf. Lumen Gentium a.18: ‘He willed that... the bishops should be shepherds in his Church until the end of the world.’


6 Cf. Vatican II, Lumen Gentium a.21: ‘... the apostles... by the imposition of hands... passed on to their collaborators the gift of the Spirit, which is transmitted down to our day through episcopal consecration.’
existed power and authority among early Christians. It is merely to observe that these had not yet fully crystallized around offices and office-holders.\(^7\) There is simply no special class, order or caste of professional ministers. Neither are there superiors over against inferiors, nor rulers over against subjects.

**The ultimate basis of all forms of ministry**

For Paul there are not two kinds of Christians, those who minister and those who receive ministry. In his view all Christians have gifts of the Spirit to share with others. All are interdependent for teaching and mutual help. No one in the ‘body of Christ’ is exempt from outreach to others, for ‘to each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good’ (1 Cor 12:7).\(^8\) ‘At its root,’ remarks Daniel Harrington, ‘ministry is not simply a profession or a church office. Rather, it is a way of responding to the gift of the Holy Spirit and of living a Christian life for others.’\(^9\) So much so that Paul understood the meaning of Church as ‘an interplay of charismatic ministries – expressions of spirit and power in the actual being and doing for others in word and deed.’\(^10\) All of its members are ministers, and all are ministered to.

**D. PARTICULAR NEW TESTAMENT MINISTERS AND MINISTRIES**

A study of ministry in the New Testament shows that it is impossible to make an exact list of all the different kinds of ministries which existed in New Testament times. It is impossible too to give an exact job description of those which are listed, e.g. in 1 Cor 12: 8-10; 1 Cor 12:28-30; Rom 12:6-8; and Eph 4:11. However, I will go on to briefly outline specific features of leadership as this pertains to particular persons in the NT churches and particular areas of church life.

**1. The Twelve (Founding-Apostles)**

*Their role and significance*

All the gospels present a group called ‘the Twelve.’ They begin to exist as a group during the earthly ministry of Jesus as a charismatic prophet proclaiming the coming of the kingdom of God. The gospels tell us that he personally chose this Twelve and instructed them (Mk 4:10). One saying attributed to him (Mt 19:28; Lk 22:28-30) declares his purpose in choosing them: - to sit on (twelve) thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel. They are a symbol of Israel’s twelve patriarchs and twelve tribes. It was on them that Jesus was founding the renewed Israel, just as the original Israel was founded on the twelve sons of Jacob (Israel). They symbolize the intention of Jesus to gather the lost sheep of Israel into a new community.\(^11\)

The NT points to the Twelve as the original Christian community, the first community of disciples, and thus the beginnings of the Church as a community of disciples.

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\(^8\) Carolyn Osiek, ‘Ministry,’ *The Collegeville Pastoral Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996), 623-624, remarks: ‘As Christian tradition developed, ministry, once seen as incumbent on all the baptized, came to be understood as the purview of professionals’ (623).


They are the nucleus of the Christian community formed by the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. Yet while the gospels present them as companions of Jesus during his years of ministry they also show them as authorities in the Church.  

How Mark in particular understood their founding role is summed up in 3:14: ‘And he appointed twelve, whom he also named apostles, to be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message, and to have authority to cast out demons.’ He identifies them as being empowered by Jesus and sent out (the term ‘apostle’ denotes one who is sent) to share in his kingdom ministry of teaching and healing. In Mt 18:18 they are given supervisory authority, in the form of the power to bind and loose, whether that means admitting to the community or making binding regulations. For Luke in Acts they function as the witnesses appointed by Jesus to his life, death and resurrection. He points to the Twelve as the ultimate authorities, with the task of overseeing the life and mission of the Church as a whole. They function as a kind of council which convenes the community whenever decisions have to be made which affect the life of the Church as a whole (See Acts 15). However, Acts 16:4 is the last time Luke mentions them. They have apparently ceased to exist as a special group.

**Unique ministry of the Twelve permanently influential**

The ministry of the Twelve was a unique ministry, but one that would affect the Church for all time. Yet because it was unique, it lasted in this form only while they were still alive. The claim that bishops are the successors of the apostles means that they are just that, successors, not the apostles themselves. As unique witnesses to the historical Jesus, his words and deeds, his life, ministry, death and resurrection, the Twelve are, in a certain sense, a unique founding group, without successors. But as a symbol of guiding pastoral care entrusted to the Church by the risen Christ, they function as the original model of a succession of Spirit-filled apostolic leaders, who have the responsibility of teaching, guiding and overseeing the churches.

**Not local church leaders**

There is no NT evidence that any of the Twelve ever founded local churches or, like James of Jerusalem, served as heads of local churches. Carolyn Osiek remarks: ‘It seems that the apostles did not have local leadership positions but functioned more as a wider group of overseers, for what we might refer to as “long-range planning.”’ There is no evidence in the Acts of the Apostles, for instance, that any one of the Twelve presided over a local church. It is generally agreed that James, who as head elder was the leader of the Jerusalem church (although not called a bishop), was ‘the brother of the Lord’ and not the same as the James of Alphæus mentioned in the lists of the Twelve. Although Peter has sometimes been called the bishop of Antioch, there is no evidence in Acts that he either brought Christianity there or presided over that community (cf. 11:19-20). A more ancient tradition reports that Peter was the first bishop of Rome. This seems quite unlikely from what we know of Christianity at Rome. The supposition that, when he did come to Rome (presumably in the 60’s), he took over and became the first bishop of Rome represents a

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retrojection of later church order (organisation).16 It is only several centuries later that particular apostles are described as ‘bishops’ of first-century Christian centres, descriptions which are anachronisms.17 The fact that the Twelve (founding apostles) were not bishops or local church leaders, and, in fact, coexisted in Jerusalem with James who was the local church leader, is one reason why exegetes have a difficulty about bishops being successors to the apostles.18

Succession to the Twelve
Nowhere in the NT are the Twelve understood as having successors19 or providing successors. As to the question of succession to their function, the NT never raises the issue of succession to their role. There is nothing in the NT literature about a regular process of ordination, nothing to support the assumption that by a chain of laying on of hands (what Yves Congar has called ‘linear descent’), every local elder-overseer could trace a pedigree of ordination back to ‘the apostles.’20 The NT tells us nothing either, about whether church appointments were held for a limited time or for life.21 Consequently, it is more accurate to see the role of the Church’s hierarchy as continuing the original mission given to the Twelve at a further stage of its development, than to speak simply of the transmission of the responsibilities and powers of ministry from the apostles to bishops and their co-workers.22

2. The Missionary Apostles

Their identity and activity
Who were these, and what did they do? They were people like Paul, Barnabas, and Apollos, who received a commission to preach the word and form new communities. They included Andronicus and Junia (Rom 16:7); Prisca [known also as Priscilla] and Aquila (Acts 18:1-3; Rom 16:3; 1Cor 16:19,) and Epaphroditus (Phil 2:25). They are all also co-workers of Paul, and included women as well as men. Gerard Kelly has observed:

17 The idea that Peter functioned as the first bishop of Rome, e.g., can be traced back no further than the third century. There is no indisputable evidence, in fact, of a single bishop in Rome before the middle of the second century.
18 Brown, Priest and Bishop, 54. Cf. Mitchell, Mission and Ministry: "The Lukian view of the Twelve does not, then, portray them as early "bishops" (heads of local churches), nor does it regard them as 'sacramental practitioners': responsible for activities like baptism, eucharist, "ordination" or reconciliation’ (119). Cf. Paul Bernier, Ministry in the Church: A Historical and Pastoral Approach (Mystic CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1992): ‘Note that nowhere in the New Testament does it say that the apostles or the Twelve, were bishops. This equation was made by Cyprian at a later date. There is no evidence for linking the “college of apostles and the college of bishops.” To say that the apostles were the first bishops goes beyond the New Testament evidence’ (40).
19 Mitchell, Mission and Ministry, 118. Cf. Lumen Gentium a.20: ‘... the apostles were careful to appoint successors in this hierarchically constituted society.’ Also: ‘They... designated... men and ruled that on their death other approved men should take over their ministry.’
21 Ibid.
23 Kelly, ‘Ordination in the Presbyteral Order,’ 262.
The ministry of the word is the key to an understanding of this kind of ‘apostle.’ They also exercised some pastoral authority over local communities or regions, by personal visits, writing letters, (letters in the case of Paul that are not free of curses, threats, rebukes, shaming and sarcasm);

providing instructions and commands; exercising judgments; sending co-workers; appointing local leaders, etc. The areas of authority of these missionary apostles, however, were not clearly defined.

Leaders of worship?
The missionary apostles may have been leaders of worship, but this is not certain. Paul and Apollos in 1 Cor 1:12-17, and Philip in Acts 8:38, however, are said to baptise, and the twelve in Mt 28:18, are commissioned to baptise. Nevertheless we cannot be sure that this was the exclusive privilege of these individuals or groups.

Proclaiming the word leads to the establishment of churches
From the example of Paul it can be inferred that the missionary apostle’s role of preaching the gospel also included organising those who accepted the message into a community of disciples, i.e. establishing a church. Thus, while we are short on details, we know that he spent eighteen months in Corinth setting up the Christian community there (Acts 18:11). Paul was the founder of the Corinthian Church, but we know nothing about who founded some other churches that became famous, such as those of Rome and Alexandria.

The emergence of churches as communities of believers is a consequence of apostolic, missionary preaching. Preaching the gospel message by missionaries produces that faith-response of the hearers, through which they are saved (cf. Rom 5:1; 1 Cor 1:18; Col 1:5-6). Their preaching brings people together as a community. Persons’ shared attachment to Christ and to their fellow-believers is signified through baptism. In other words, the message has as its natural outcome the foundation of churches as communities of Christ’s followers, the centre of whose life is the celebration and extension of Christ’s work and presence.

Their successors and their roles
Indications in the Pastoral Letters (1-2 Timothy; Titus) suggest that the missionary apostles were replaced by presbytery/bishops in the latter part of the NT era as overseers of house churches and assisted by a group known as ‘deacons.’ The Letter to Titus 1:5, 7 says that presbytery-bishops are to be appointed in every town. Kevin Seasoltz observes:

In the Pastoral Letters, episkopos is used in the singular, whereas presbyteros appears in the plural. It is likely that by the end of the first century, the episkopos was chosen from among the elders in the community for roles of leadership and administration in the local church, but there is no clear evidence in the NT that the presbyters were subordinate to a single episkopos or overseer, as was the case in the second and third centuries.

The Pastoral in general present them as the official teachers in the community, with a responsibility as prudent fathers, for teaching the sound doctrine that has come from Paul,

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26 Cf. Power, Ministers of Christ and his Church, 19-20.
for good example, for discipline, and for sound administration of the house-hold of the church.\textsuperscript{29} So, in the Pastorals in general there is a distinct move from missionaries to pastors and from mission and innovation to maintenance, continuity and stability.

3. The Government of the Community

The gospel basis of Christian leadership
The language of ministry in the gospels is not the language of power, of jurisdiction, of ruling, not even ruling a household. For leadership, says Jesus, is about being the servant, the \textit{diakonos} of a household, not its lord and master. Leadership takes its cue from him, who came not to be served but to serve, and to lay down his life for others (Mk 10:42-45 par.; Cf. Jn 15:13; Phil 2: 6-11).

Bishops today are residential leaders of local churches. In addition they share a collective responsibility for the good of the Church as a whole. How far this represents the evolution of a role may be seen in relation to what the NT tells us and does not tell us about the leadership and government of the original Christian communities.

Apostles not local church leaders
In the first place, it must be said that the one thing that the NT apostle does not do and has no commission to do is to govern a church as its local leader. While e.g. Paul wrote letters when he was written to, the day-by-day business of the churches of Corinth and Philippi e.g. was conducted by the local churches and their leaders, and not directed by Paul from long distance.

The seven helpers in Acts 6
The first local church administrators encountered in the NT are the seven helpers listed in Acts 6:5, sometimes erroneously referred to as the ‘seven deacons.’ The recommendation of this structure by the Twelve to the whole community, is the closest the Twelve ever come in the NT to appointing local church leaders. In Luke’s presentation these helpers emerge as more than mere table-waiters, in fact, as missionaries to hellenized Jews.

Government by presbyters (elders)
Luke also speaks of ‘presbyters’ (Gk. \textit{presbyteroi}) or ‘elders’ (Acts 11:30). This was a form of leadership in Jewish synagogues (Acts 15:22) and practised by the first Christians, who were Jews themselves. It is a mistake to think of them as just the same as modern priests,\textsuperscript{30} even though Vatican II gave that name to priests today. They are enlisted in Jerusalem to assist the Twelve in their ministry, although there is no evidence they were appointed by the Twelve. As time goes on, pastoral care and guidance of particular communities seems, generally speaking, to have been their shared collective task. In 1 Tim 5:17ff, they are also said to preach and teach. They were sometimes called \textit{episkopoi} (e.g. in Acts 20:28 within Luke’s “eulogistic reflection on Paul’s life”),\textsuperscript{31} a term that suggests the functions of overseeing\textsuperscript{32} and shepherding. Kenan Osborne claims that ‘there is a kernel of truth in the proposal that presbyter stems or at least is more common in Jewish Christian circles,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{29} Raymond Brown, \textit{The Churches the Apostles Left Behind} (New York/Ramsey: Paulist Press, 1984), 34. Paul Bernier, \textit{Ministry in the Church}, suggests: ‘Faced with various types of outside opposition, the communities looked to recognized office-holders to guarantee the “deposit of faith” (1 Timothy 6:20)’ (36).
\item \textsuperscript{30} Bernier, \textit{Ministry in the Church}, 40.
\item \textsuperscript{31} Collins, \textit{The Many Faces of the Church}, 52.
\item \textsuperscript{32} Collins, \textit{The Many Faces of the Church}, 51, states: ‘An overseer... is a person who has supervisory responsibilities over things, events, or people.’
\end{itemize}
while *episkopos* stems or at least is more common in Graeco-Christian circles. Early on, in any case, the terminology is somewhat fluid, and it seems that the terms ‘presbyter’ and ‘*episkopos*’ are quite interchangeable (see e.g. Acts 20:17-28). Only later will the emerging pattern develop into the ‘classic’ model of bishops, deacons, and presbyters (elders) for distinct forms of ministry.

**No long term forms of government**

The first generation of Christians were expecting the early return of Jesus to complete his work of salvation. They were not concerned about making long-term provisions for leadership and ministry. In that context, it does not surprise us that the NT does not prescribe any one form of government which must be followed ever afterwards. It cannot be proved from the NT that the Church is meant to be a monarchy, an oligarchy, or a democracy. Fundamentally it is a community of disciples – of brothers and sisters ‘in Christ.’ In that sense the Church is meant to be a Christocracy (led by the Risen Lord in the Spirit) This is meant to be the controlling factor in the emergence and choice of forms of leadership.

**Community involvement in government**

Community involvement may be seen in the first major decision involving the Church as a whole, as it is described in Acts 15:1-29, that gentiles could become Christians, and without having to live as Jews. In different ways this decision involved not only the ‘apostles’ and the ‘elders’ but the whole Jerusalem ‘assembly,’ the ‘church,’ as well. Likewise the decision to enlist the Seven for a particular need (Acts 6:1-6) involved not only ‘the twelve’ but also ‘the whole community of the disciples.’

**4. The Ministry of Worship**

**Leaders of worship**

If we look to the NT for proof that one particular kind of person, and that person alone, was commissioned or ordained to administer the sacraments, we will be disappointed. The eminent exegete, Raymond Brown, has remarked: ‘I know of no instance of ordination for the purpose of enabling people to administer sacraments.’ What we do know is that the Eleven (symbolically the Twelve) in Mt 28:19 were commissioned to baptise people, and that in Acts 2:41 they seem to be the ones who baptised three thousand persons, and that at least Philip from the seven helpers named in Acts 6:5 did baptise. What we do not know is whether the ministry of baptising was restricted to particular persons.

In the narratives of the institution of the Eucharist (1 Cor 11:23-25 par.), the Eleven (or Twelve?) are asked to repeat the sacrificial meal in remembrance of Jesus. We have no record, however, of their actually doing so. What we do know, even from the institution accounts, is that from the beginning it was the practice of the Christian communities to celebrate ‘the Lord’s Supper’ (1 Cor 11:20). Evidently the command of Jesus was understood as a command to the Church generally to do what Jesus did, and to do it in

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33 Kenan Osborne, *Priesthood: A History of the Ordained Ministry in the Roman Catholic Church* (New York/Mawah: Paulist Press, 1988), 45; cf. Raymond Brown, *The Churches the Apostles Left Behind* (New York/Ramsey: Paulist Press, 1984), 33: ‘...I think it plausible that from the synagogue Christians borrowed a pattern of groups of presbyters for each church, while the pastoral-supervisor (*episkopos*) role given to all or many of these presbyters came from the organizational model of close-knit Jewish sectarian groups such as the Dead Sea Essenes.’

remembrance of him. The NT data, in fact, include quite a few references to gatherings of Christians to celebrate the Lord’s Supper.

The question comes up: Who presided at these gatherings? Raymond Brown observes that ‘no cultic or liturgical role is assigned to the presbyter-bishops in the Pastorals.’35 He goes on to state: ‘As for the Eucharist, we know virtually nothing of who presided in NT times.’36 Arthur Patzia suggests:

Nothing is said about the “officiants” of the Lord’s Supper in the New Testament. One suspects that Paul presided when he was present, but on different occasions other apostles, teachers, elders, deacons or the head of the household presided. As far as we know, officiating at the Lord’s Supper was not an ordained or a “priestly” function during the first century.37

Francis Moloney makes the point that while there are references to episcopi, presbyteroi, and diakonoi in the Catholic Epistles (the letters of James, 1 and 2 Peter, 1, 2, and 3 John, and Jude), expressions sometimes translated as ‘bishops, priests and deacons,’ they do not have a priestly role ‘like the priests of the Jewish and the Greco-Roman religions.’38 He insists:

A careful reading of these passages indicates that these ‘offices’ within early Christian communities are not associated with a cultic ministry. They are never associated with the celebration of the Eucharist, and are almost always described or instructed in a way that suggests they were the senior administrator of a single community.39 He concludes that while there may have been some sense of hierarchy, there does not appear to be any hierus ("priest") in the early Church.40 In any case, as Donald Senior points out: ‘We should keep in mind the possibility that clear restriction of the role of leadership of Eucharist to a designated minister may not have been a concern in the earliest Church.’41

It can be assumed that every Christian community had its leaders, persons who presided over the life of the community. Persons like Prisca (Priscilla) and Aquila (Acts 18:1-3, 26; 1 Cor 16:19; Rom 16:3f), whom Paul says ‘work with me in Christ Jesus’ (Rom 16:3). They were a married couple who led a house church first in Ephesus, then in Rome. Another leader was Gaius, whom Paul calls ‘host to me and to the whole church’ (Rom 16:23). When the community came together for the ‘breaking of bread’ (Acts 2:42, 46), someone must have presided, and it seems reasonable to surmise that ordinarily it would have been one of the community leaders. Paul Bernier makes the observation: ‘Nor are we told that it was an exclusively male prerogative. It seems most likely that in the house churches that were common, the host-or hostess-presided.’42 But since the Eucharist was seen as proclaiming the death of the Lord until he comes (1 Cor 11:26), at least on occasion, its presider may have been a prophet, a Spirit-filled preacher. The Didache, Ch.10, in fact, speaks of prophets presiding. But whoever it was, it would be an anachronism to claim that the first Christians thought of this person as having been set

36 Ibid, 143.
37 Patzia, The Emergence of the Church, 227.
40 Ibid.
42 Bernier, Ministry in the Church, 40.
apart by the power of the sacrament of holy orders to consecrate the bread and wine of the Eucharist. Anyway, ‘the chief emphasis in church documents at this time,’ as Bernier points out, ‘is not on presiding over the liturgy or about passing on a chain of unbroken sacramental powers, but on building up the community.’

5. The Ministry of Preaching and Teaching

A variety of ways and persons for telling the good news

This is a major part of the work of an apostle like Paul. Yet there are many others who engage in the ministry of the Word. In the Jerusalem Church e.g., the Seven are chosen ‘to wait on tables’ (Acts 6:2), but some of these engage in the ministry of the Word (Acts 6:10; 8:5). Then there were those called ‘prophets,’ ‘evangelists’ and ‘teachers’ (1 Cor 12:28; Eph 4:11). Exactly what each type of ministry was is not clear, but the texts suggest that a prophet was a charismatic speaker, not an official. What is clear is that there was a variety of ways and a variety of persons for telling the good news of Christ as salvation, and that they all contributed to the outward thrust of the Church. The ministry of teaching (what will later be called the ‘magisterium’) was shared by a variety of different people, and not always persons with an official mandate.

E. Ten Significant Conclusions from the New Testament Data

A review of the NT evidence suggests that many of the numerous functions carried out by a variety of ministers in the NT period were combined in the single office of bishop (and by extension to his presbyters) in the post-New Testament period. In time, in fact, the clergy came to hold a virtual monopoly on ministry. What, then, is of particular significance from the earlier patterns of ministry in the New Testament? I suggest the following:

(1) While Jesus gathered disciples and in other ways during his lifetime laid the foundations for his Church, the Church is principally a post-Easter event. As such, under the guidance of the Spirit of the risen Lord, and in response to emerging needs, the community of Jesus has gradually shaped the details of its life and ministries. In the process, ministries that were originally very charismatic and diverse gradually become more ordered, uniform and regulated.

(2) While the range of NT ministries of community leadership evolved into the familiar threelfold form of bishop, presbyter, and deacon, the gifts for ministry of all priests today are connected to the person of Jesus Christ and to his ministry of love, as exemplified and illustrated in the NT. ‘The order of presbyter,’ asserts Donald Senior, ‘finds its ultimate foundation in the priestly ministry of Jesus Christ who with compassion gave his own life for the life of the world.’ In the gospels he has said that he came not to be served but to serve

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43 Bernier, Ministry in the Church, 49. He observes: ‘Life then did not organize itself around the liturgy, but around building up the community’s life. Eucharist was but one aspect of that larger reality. Preaching, admonition, and works of charity are far more central than questions about “who presides” at Baptism or Eucharist’ (46).


45 Osborne, Priesthood, 37, remarks: ‘If the resurrection is an essential element of the Church, then the resurrection must come before one can actually speak of Church in a meaningful way.’

and that he is among his disciples as one who serves (Mt 20:28; Mk 10:45; Lk 22:26-27). He has stressed that anyone who would be a minister must also be a disciple who imitates him by washing the feet of other disciples (Jn 13:1-7). The living presence of Jesus Christ in the Church through the Spirit continues to be the source as well as the model for all authentic leadership by ordained ministers, and, for that matter, by all other ministers.

(3) In the foundational period of the Church (up to c.70) no single pattern of leadership emerged as one ‘willed by Jesus,’ or one which was binding on all the churches. Ministry and leadership were quite diverse.47

(4) It is an anachronism to speak of permanent ‘offices’ or of ‘ordained’ persons during the first generation of Christianity. On the other hand, particular persons in the community did exercise authority. The kind of authority which they exercised, however, was related to their service of God’s word48 and to their building up the body of Christ.

(5) Because of the references in Acts to the actual involvement of all Christians in processes of church decision-making, any claim today that laity are not entitled to any participation in decision-making, even at the level of the universal Church, is not in harmony with what we see in the Church of the beginnings. It is true that by the time we come to the Pastoral Epistles (1 Timothy, 2 Timothy; and Titus), a tendency is developing towards a more hierarchically-governed Church, ‘where specific leaders and offices are prominent,’49 but not so as to totally exclude in principle the communal features of the pattern of decision-making mentioned in Acts.

(6) Based on a study of NT sources, the essential aspect of the ministry of a priest cannot be seen to be the power to celebrate the Eucharist. Unlike the Council of Trent, Vatican II made the ministry of proclaiming God’s word rather than leadership of worship the primary responsibility of ordained persons. (However, sacramental worship is presented by the Council as a special and particularly effective way of proclaiming the gospel).50

(7) Any continuity between the NT data and the role of ordained priest cannot be simply on the level of terminology. An overall assessment of the NT data and subsequent historical developments suggests that continuity is to be found on the level of certain functions (e.g., community building, pastoral care and nurturing, leadership of worship, ministry of the word, etc.). While these functions in the earliest decades of the Church’s existence were performed by a variety of individuals, they were later combined into what will be called the office of the presbyter/ episkopos.51

(8) What happened in the ancient Church is that different ministries and offices emerged and evolved in response to different needs, conditions and cultures, and in response to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. It is to the credit of Christians of that epoch that in order to be faithful to the command of Jesus to go out to the entire world and tell the good news, they and their communities were willing to be flexible and creative. The need to build and maintain

47 Bernier, Ministry in the Church, 28.
48 See Power, Christian Priest, 17.
49 Patzia, The Emergence of the Church, 154.
Christian community and communion managed to get the upper hand over the human tendency to freeze or mummify existing structures and ways of doing things. Nowhere is this flexibility more evident than in the earliest New Testament period (up to 70).

(9) The New Testament (in the foundational period 30 to 70) gives no support to the tendency in our time to invoke long-standing traditions as proof of the intentions of Jesus on this or that for all time. Against such a static view of reality, the New Testament speaks to us of openness, initiative and growth, of search and discernment, and of diversity rather than uniformity. Just as much as the original Church, we Christians today must be concerned at all levels of persons and issues to explore together ‘what the Spirit is saying to the churches’ (Rev 2:7). And together to come to conclusions and decisions, of which it can be said: ‘it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us...’ (Acts 15:28). For the decisions of yesterday, conceived in the circumstances and conditions of yesterday, are not necessarily appropriate or relevant for today or tomorrow.

(10) To be specific, nowhere does the NT teach or suggest that the only legitimate or workable structure of church leadership is the ancient three-fold one of ordained bishop-priest-deacon. For a future united ‘Church of churches,’ what does this say about the possibility of having both churches led by bishops and churches led by elders? And if male leaders have been zealous in applying 1 Cor 14:34 ‘women should be silent in the churches’ in a literal sort of way to bolster their own authority, why do they not apply equal zeal to exploring all the implications of that other saying of Paul: ‘all of you are one in Christ Jesus’ (Gal 3:28)?

Author: Brian Gleeson CP is a Passionist priest, and lectures in christology, ecclesiology, sacramentology and liturgy, at the Yarra Theological Union, Box Hill, Victoria, where he is also Head of the Department of Church History and Systematic Theology.