

# The Bishop of Rome Revisited

David Albert Jones OP

The Jewish community in Rome in the first century was indeed very large (some tens of thousands) and not unified but divided between several central synagogues. The early Christian community in Rome was also large, sprawling and diverse, accustomed to receive incomers from all parts of the world and somewhat subject to factions<sup>1</sup>. It would have been difficult to exercise leadership effectively over such a body. This is not in dispute. What is at issue is simply and solely the question of whether, within Rome in the first century, there was an office of president of the college of ministers, that is, the office of a single presiding bishop of the church in Rome<sup>2</sup>.

Dr Duffy writes that 'we can afford to be honest historians, and let the evidence lead us where it will'<sup>3</sup>. Yet what is at issue is what *counts* as evidence, and, in particular, whether it is legitimate to use the great wealth of second-century sources as a guide to first century practice. *The Shepherd of Hermas* says that the role of sending letters to other local churches was proper to Clement<sup>4</sup>. Dr Duffy claims that this assertion 'seems to imply [he was] the presbyter in charge of foreign correspondence'<sup>5</sup>. If Clement dealt with other churches, are we to presume that this was *all* he did? The suggestion is left unexamined that Clement had authority to issue letters to other churches *because* it was he who presided over the local Church of Rome. Should not the fact that there are many other examples of bishops who wrote on behalf of the local church, and that Clement is counted by second century Roman lists as presiding over the local church, count as evidence? Instead we are encouraged to accept the pleasing construction of 'the role of Clement and other "foreign correspondents"'<sup>6</sup> who [*ex hypothesi*] corrected other churches without holding a special position of authority within their own. Instead of positing a role that we know existed in the early second century, we are asked to postulate a ministry for which we have no direct evidence at all.

Indeed, the evidence on the table is woefully slim: Jewish organisation in Rome was not united within a single structure, and the three texts which might have given direct evidence for a single

presiding bishop are frustratingly ambiguous on the matter. That is it. There is little else that can be said. Dr Duffy would like the texts to yield the stronger conclusion that there was no such office; but the evidence is not there. There is, in fact, very little that the writings of Clement, Ignatius and Hermas can tell us about episcopal presidency in Rome in the first century. These three short texts are compatible *both* with admitting the existence of a president of the college of bishop-presbyters *and* with denying the existence of such an office. The relevant passages are quite short and anyone interested should go to the sources and judge for him or herself<sup>7</sup>. If the episcopal reading still seems 'strained' then Dix<sup>8</sup> offers some helpful enlightenment.

That these letters are compatible with the existence of a mon-episcopate is certainly the mature opinion of Duchesne<sup>9</sup>:

What conclusion can be drawn from all this if not that the system of government by a monarchical bishop was already in existence, in countries west of Asia, at the time when such books were written as *The Shepherd of Hermas* or the *Second Epistle of Clement*, *The Teaching of the Apostles*, and *The First Epistle of Clement*; and that, therefore, the testimony of these old writers to the collegiate episcopate does not preclude the existence of the monarchical episcopate?<sup>10</sup>

The claim of my original article<sup>11</sup> was that the interpretation of this meagre evidence has been shaped by the presuppositions brought to it. First and foremost, the idea of a dramatic evolution during the period for which we have least textual evidence, is a prejudice, an intrusion, an *idée fixe* that prevents us from using the wealth of second century material as we should—as a reliable guide to first century Christian ministry.

It is simple honesty to recognise that there *is* a deep-rooted prejudice in favour of the idea of a radical evolution (rather than simply growth and harmonious development) in first century of the Early Church. The point of crudely and graphically outlining this 'mindset'<sup>12</sup> was to unmask what is a potentially distorting mythology. The portrayal of this mindset was not constructed *a priori* but was an amalgamation of dichotomies put forward by contemporary historians<sup>13</sup>, combined with attitudes the author had himself come across. Of course it is not the case that all historians are peddling simplistic stereotypes, but it is a moot question whether some underlying assumptions do not betray the subtle influence of some of these generally unexamined metaphors. This was the content of the original critique:

Yet though sensitive historians such as Chadwick *can* see the dangers of idealising the apostolic order of ministry, they are consistently *unaware* how deeply this mindset has informed the interpretation of evidence<sup>14</sup>.

Dr Duffy complains that 'no references are given to indicate just who actually subscribes to this "pervasive underlying mindset"'<sup>15</sup>. As mentioned repeatedly, the claim of the article was not that this mindset is acknowledged explicitly by most contemporary historians. What was being asserted was that Harnack, classical Protestant rationalists and some contemporary evangelicals subscribe more or less to the whole bag whereas careful historians like Chadwick, Frend and Kelly, while seeing through it, still suffer its subterranean influence [this is the point that seems to have touched a nerve]. Further, one should add that there are indeed some few remarkable and independent-minded thinkers who seem to have escaped its influence altogether. Here one should make special mention of the historian Dr Duffy lauds as 'the greatest of all Catholic Church historians'<sup>16</sup>: Louis Duchesne. Reading historical evidence is indeed 'a skill for which some people have more aptitude than others'<sup>17</sup> and, on the point at issue, Duchesne provides the measure of clarity of thought, whilst others fail to escape from the prejudices of their own generation:

Towards the middle of the 2nd century, the monarchical episcopate also comes before us as an undisputed fact of received tradition, in the Western communities of Rome, Lyons, Corinth, Athens, and Crete, as well as in more Eastern provinces. Nowhere is there a trace of any *protest* against a sudden or revolutionary change, *transferring* government from a college of bishops to that of a single monarchical rule<sup>18</sup>.

In like manner, when they spoke of the priests of Rome, or of the bishops of Corinth, the term covered *both the higher grades of the hierarchy* [president and college]. But the natural course of events tended to concentrate the authority in the hands of one person, and this change, if there was a change [!], was one of those which came about of themselves, insensibly, without anything like a revolution... Between this president [of the episcopal college] and the single bishop of the following centuries there is no specific difference.<sup>19</sup>

The view of Duchesne is carefully nuanced but it is clearly distinguishable from the view of those who 'read the evidence'<sup>20</sup> as implying 'the absence of a single bishop for the city until the second century.'<sup>21</sup>

- 1 Is it the case though that 'It is clear from Paul's letter to the Romans that there were a number of churches there' [Duffy p. 306]? Are there any early texts attesting to the existence of churches in Rome, rather than a church in Rome?
- 2 Jones, D.A., "Was there a bishop of Rome in the first century", *New Blackfriars*, March 1999.
- 3 Duffy p.308.
- 4 *pempsei oun Klemes eis tas exo poleis, ekeino gar epitetraptai*. Hermas V.2. iv.
- 5 Duffy p.304.
- 6 Duffy p.307.
- 7 For English translations see Staniforth, M., *Early Christian Writings*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1998 and *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Volume II*, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1983.
- 8 Dix, G., "The Ministry in the Early Church" in Kirk, KE., (ed.) *The Apostolic Ministry*, London 1946.
- 9 Duchesne, L., *Histoire Ancienne de L'Eglise*, Paris 1906. The translations given here mainly follow the *Early History of The Christian Church* London 1909 reprinted 1957 (sometimes adding emphasis), but references will be to the French original.
- 10 *Que conclure de tout cela, sinon que l'épiscopat unitaire existait déjà dans les pays situés à l'occident de l'Asie, au temps où furent écrits des livres comme Pasteur d'Hermas, la II Clementis, la Doctrine des Apôtres, l'épître de saint Clément, et que, par suite, les témoignages donnés par ces vieux textes à l'épiscopat collégial sont nullement exclusifs de l'épiscopat unitaire?* Duchesne p. 93.
- 11 Jones NB March 1999
- 12 Jones NB March 1999, p. 142.
- 13 Chadwick, H., *The Early Church*, Penguin, Harmondsworth. 1993, p. 51; Frend, W.H.C., *The Rise of Christianity*. DLT, London, 1984, p. 139-140; Hengel, M., *Acts and the theology of Earliest Christianity*, London 1979, p. 121-122; Staniforth, M., (ed. and notes) *Early Christian Writings*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1986, p. 236. The dichotomy of 'lay democracy' over and against 'clerical authoritarianism' is identified by Chadwick [p.59], who describes it as 'often supposed'. It is without doubt a potent part of the overall myth, operative at a subterranean level, even for many who expressly reject its historical plausibility. It is not an invention of this author [*pace* Duffy pp. 302].
- 14 Jones NB March 1999, p. 142 emphasis added.
- 15 Duffy p. 302.
- 16 Duffy p. 301.
- 17 Duffy p. 308.
- 18 *C'est aussi comme un état de fait, incontesté et traditionnel, que l'épiscopat unitaire nous apparaît, vers le milieu du II siècle, dans les chrétientés occidentales, à Rome, à Lyon, à Corinthe, à Athènes, en Crète, tout comme dans les provinces situées plus à l'est. Nulle part il n'y a trace d'une protestation contre un changement brusque et comme révolutionnaire, qui aurait fait passer la direction des communautés du régime collégial au régime monarchique.* Duchesne, p. 91.
- 19 *De même on pouvait, en parlant des prêtres de Rome ou des évêques de Corinthe, réunir dans une seule expression les deux degrés supérieurs [président et conseillers] de la hiérarchie. Mais le progrès naturel des choses allait à une concentration de l'autorité entre les mains d'un seul; ce changement, si changement il y eut, était de ceux qui se font tout seuls, insensiblement, sans révolution... Entre ce président [du conseil épiscopal] et l'évêque unique des siècles suivants il n'y a pas de diversité spécifique.* Duchesne, p. 94-95.
- 20 Duffy p. 301.
- 21 Duffy p. 306.