

Was there a Bishop of Rome in the First Century?

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David Albert Jones' article¹ purports to address a strictly historical question: did the Church in first-century Rome have a single presiding bishop? His argument is designed to examine and refute the view (found in my history of the popes among other places²) that the rule of a single bishop was slow to develop in Rome, and that, consequently, the later Roman episcopal lists (most notably that provided by Irenaeus towards the last quarter of the second century) represent a retrospective tidying up of what had been in fact a messier and more complex situation.

Behind this apparently straightforward agenda, however—the sorting out of the facts as far as we can discover them—Fr Jones has another and more pressing objective. He wants to suggest that those like myself who hold that the emergence of the monoepiscopate in Rome was a post-apostolic development, still incomplete at the beginning of the second century, do so not on the basis of the evidence, but because they are in the grip of an unCatholic mindset which colours—and in his view distorts—historical judgement. So, on the first page of his article, he identifies the position he is criticising as “the classic *Protestant* account of the matter dating from at least as far back as Harnack”.³ I am intrigued by that adjective “Protestant”. What work is it doing in the fabric of Fr Jones' argument? It is of course true that Harnack read the evidence in this way: but then so did his older contemporary Louis Duchesne, a Catholic priest with a fair claim to be considered the greatest of all Catholic Church historians, and certainly the greatest nineteenth-century historian of the early Papacy. Why then describe a view held by both Catholics and Protestants as “the classic *Protestant* view”—unless it is to suggest, before the evidence is even considered, that no *real* Catholic will entertain it?

This suggestion is made explicit at the end of Fr Jones' article, when he constructs an anatomy of the “mindset” of those who subscribe to this unCatholic view. They idealise, he thinks, the early

ministry, as “free, loose, inspired and lay, and see the emergence of clerical forms as a fall from primitive innocence”, and he produces what he calls “a confused list” of antitheses which he believes map the underlying assumptions of those misled by this mindset. Once again, we are in the realm of scatter-gun innuendo. With one exception, which I will come to in a moment, no references are given to indicate just who actually subscribes to this “pervasive underlying mindset”. Notoriously, there is no easier argumentative task than knocking down one’s own straw men. The character of Fr Jones’s list will be sufficiently clear if we note that “Apostolic” is contrasted with “protoCatholic”, “vitality” with “formalism”, “Democracy” (in the first century!!!) with “authorit-arianism” and “freedom” with “rigidity”.⁴ The one specific target for these charges is me. It does not inspire confidence in his markmanship. Fr Jones accuses me of subscribing to this “incoherent yet evocative set of antitheses”, on the basis of a single sentence quoted from my book. In it I say that by the end of the first century “the loose pattern of Church authority in the first generation of believers was giving way in many places to a more organised rule of a single bishop for each city, supported by a college of elders”.⁵

The suggestion is that by contrasting “loose” with “organised” here I idealise primitive anarchy, deplore the onset of clericalism, and thereby reveal my subscription to his “pervasive underlying mindset”. In fact, I do no such thing. “Loose” is by no means always or even usually a term of praise, nor “organised” a term of abuse. Noone aboard an aeroplane wants the engines to be “loose” as opposed to “organised”, and I for one think much the same about church order. Had Fr Jones played fair and quoted—or even noted—the sentence which immediately follows the one he singles out, he would have seen that far from idealising primitive “looseness”, I think—and say—the opposite. Rather than deploring the emergence of the episcopate as the onset of formalist rigidity, as Jones implies I do, I describe it as a necessary response “to the wildfire spread of false teaching—heresy”. It was as a safeguard for “authentic Christian truth, and a concrete focus for unity”, that the episcopate, including of course the Roman episcopate, came to be understood as the normative form of church government.

But let us pass from Fr Jones’s debater’s innuendo to points of historical substance, noting however *en route* that some of what he himself has to say about the character of early ministry is blurred by a subtly misleading use of language. It is perfectly true (and I imagine uncontentious), for example, that Paul exercised a unique apostolic

authority in “his” churches . As Fr Jones argues, Paul gave instructions, passed judgement, reproved, punished. To describe all this, as Fr Jones does, as the Apostle “presiding” over the churches in question, however, begs a number of questions, and preempts discussion of the precise relation of apostolic to episcopal authority.⁶ To “preside” seems to me in this context a verb apt to describe a stable local ministry, presumably including some form of eucharistic *presidency*, but less useful in characterising the remote-control though certainly strong and overriding authority of an absent Apostle. Some such day to day “presidency” must surely have coexisted in the earliest church alongside Apostolic authority, but while the Apostles lived, they can hardly have been considered to be the same sort of thing.

Why might an historian, Catholic or Protestant, conclude that there was no monoepiscopate in first-century Rome? Fr Jones considers three early documents that might be read in this way: the letter of Ignatius of Antioch to the Romans, the first letter of Clement to the Corinthians, and the Roman prophetic text *The Shepherd of Hermas*. The argument from Ignatius of Antioch’s letter is, as Fr Jones points out, entirely negative. Ignatius was much preoccupied with the centrality of the episcopate, and in all his other surviving writings harps on the indispensability of the bishop. He is uncharacteristically silent on the matter in his letter to Rome, and many historians consider that this is because Ignatius knew that the Roman church in fact had not yet settled on government by a sole monarchic bishop. Jones rightly says that the argument from silence is the weakest of all arguments, and I should not myself want to lay too much weight on it: the significance of Ignatius’ silence derives from its convergence with other evidence.

Among these is the letter of Clement to Corinth. In this letter of reproof and counsel, written on behalf of the Church at Rome about the year 90 and traditionally attributed to Clement, the author speaks of the bishops and deacons in the plural, never refers to or invokes the authority of a single bishop either at Corinth or Rome, and never names himself or claims episcopal authority. Jones writes that this is “*obviously* a token of humility”,—but in doing so of course he resoundingly begs the question. A spokesman, secretary or amanuensis is not being modest in not naming himself, and the author’s silence would only be a token of humility if Clement were in fact the presiding bishop, and presiding bishops were thought of as acting *in propria persona*. But this is precisely the thing to be demonstrated. Jones admits that Clement says nothing which

indicates that there was a mono-episcopate in Rome, but that this “does not exclude there being a single presiding bishop”. Maybe, and maybe not, but historical conclusions need to be based on more than maybes. There is admittedly not much in I Clement to go on in deciding how the churches at Rome and Corinth were ordered, and, though I think the balance of the evidence is against the presence of a bishop, it would be a perfectly respectable position to say that we must remain agnostic on the issue. But Fr Jones is not arguing for agnosticism, he thinks he knows that there *was* a bishop in Rome. Yet what evidence there is in Clement’s letter works against, not for, this possibility, and it looks as if that authority was collectively exercised by a college—or at any rate a plurality, which might not be quite the same thing—of bishops and deacons.

This impression is greatly strengthened by the *Shepherd of Hermas*, a visionary text written around the year 120. The crucial passage here is that in which the seer is instructed to write down his visions and give “one copy to Clement and one to Grapte. So Clement shall send it to the cities outside, for this is his appointed role, while Grapte shall instruct the widows and orphans. But you shall read it to this city along with the presbyters who preside over the church”. [*Hermas* V.2.4] Jones indulges in a great deal of strained reading of this (from his point of view rather unpromising) text. He wants to insist that Clement is in fact the presbyter who presides as mono-bishop over the Church of Rome, and not rather as the text seems to imply, the presbyter in charge of foreign correspondence. His chief argument here appears to be that the passage would read perfectly naturally if we substitute the word “bishop” for Clement’s name. This is an entertaining argument, with a great many possibilities for creative elaboration, since by the same token the passage will read equally naturally if we substitute the word “postman”. In fact, however, the natural reading of the passage is surely that three distinct types of functionary are being described: Clement, whose job is to send letters abroad, Grapte whose job is to teach the women and children, and the presbyters, “who preside over the Church”.

The role ascribed to Clement in the *Shepherd of Hermas* is therefore strikingly consistent with the role actually exercised by the author of I Clement. Even if we accept that the man who wrote I Clement was the same Clement (not a rare name) referred to thirty years later by Hermas, neither of these, the earliest and most important non-biblical texts to emanate from the Church of Rome, contains so much as a hint that Clement was the presiding bishop of Rome, or indeed that there existed at that stage any such creature. In

referring to Church order, and in marked contrast to Ignatius, they always speak of bishops, presbyters and deacons in the plural. In the face of all this, Fr Jones's valiant insistence that nevertheless, Clement *might* have been the presiding bishop of Rome, which he then modulates into the claim that it is just as likely as not that he was, looks like historical fideism, assertion unencumbered by the need for evidence. But while the fact that *one* of these two early "Clementine" documents should fail to mention that Clement was the pope might indeed be considered a misfortune, the failure of either to do so begins to look like carelessness—or like evidence the other way. And in this context, Ignatius's otherwise puzzling silence about the role of the Roman bishop begins to seem more intelligible.

For an historian, one of the oddest features of Fr Jones's argument is his failure to address the specific context of first-century Rome: he presents his argument as part of a generalised theory about the earliest ministry, and he makes no use of the exhaustive studies of the Jewish and early Christian communities in Rome by Leon and Lampe,⁸ which offer an indispensable interpretative context for the isolated pieces of evidence he does discuss. He is thereby obliged to offer strained and unnatural readings of the Roman evidence, which is anomalous in a number of ways. I want to turn now to a brief consideration of some of those anomalies.

And the first of these is the character of the Jewish community in Rome. Rome was the largest city in the Mediterranean world, with well over a million inhabitants, and it had a correspondingly large Jewish community, of over 50,000—or rather, it had a number of such communities. There were up to fourteen synagogues in first-century Rome, and while Jews were concentrated most thickly in Trastevere, Jews and synagogues were to be found spread through the city. A number of these synagogues had their own schools, welfare organisations, and even cemeteries, and unlike the Jewish communities in other great cities like Antioch, the Roman Jews had no central organisation, no single official who presided over all the synagogues.

And it was within this setting of autonomous synagogues, each with its own leadership and presiding officials, that the earliest Christian groups in Rome emerged.

They were there in large numbers astonishingly early: by AD 49 bitter divisions about "Chrestus" within the Roman synagogues led the Emperor Claudius to expel the Jews from the city. How are we to think Christianity reached the Roman Synagogues? To just one, from which the others were colonised, or, through contacts with Palestine

and the rest of the Jewish diaspora, to more than one? And what reason do we have for thinking that the Christian Jews of Rome would seek a different and, in the mid first century, notably more centralised structure than their parent communities? It is clear from Paul's letter to the Romans that there were a number of churches there meeting in the houses of prominent Christians, a framework perhaps perpetuated in the later organisation of the Roman *tituli*. No doubt each of these churches had their own leadership—I for one do not mind if Fr Jones wishes to call them clergy. Within these communities there may have been more than one presbyter, one of whom may have been deferred to as the senior figure. As Fr Jones says “even the elders of the Jewish synagogue would have had some sort of standing chairman”. But this is a comparison which in Rome works precisely *against*, not in favour, of there having been a single bishop for the whole city, for as we have seen, the synagogues were autonomous, and the “standing chairmen” were the leaders of individual synagogues *not* of the collectivity of all the city's Jews.

It does indeed appear that the Christians to whom Paul wrote in Rome, and on whose behalf a generation later Clement wrote to Corinth, thought of themselves as *one* Church, despite meeting in several centres. How was that sense of unity sustained? The answer is almost certainly, with difficulty, and by a variety of means—by a common allegiance to Christ as Messiah, by the reading within each congregation of the same apostolic letters, by recognition of the overarching authority of the Apostles during the period when Peter and Paul were within the city, and, by extension after the Neronian persecution, perhaps by an early form of cult at the graves of the Apostles, (though there is no firm evidence for such a cult before the mid second century), by shared financial concern for and commitment to weaker and poorer churches elsewhere, by some sense of shared authority among the presbyters of the different congregations, and eventually at any rate, by the acceptance of a single presiding presbyter, the bishop. But we cannot simply *assume* that all or any of these means to unity were in place from the beginning, or that their acceptance was automatic or trouble-free. We must go by the evidence, and the evidence points to the absence of a single bishop for the city until the second century.

By the end of the first century Jews and Christians in Rome as elsewhere, of course, had long since parted company. But pluralism and contesting jurisdictions seem to have remained a feature of the Church in Rome. As the hub of Empire the city was a magnet for religious individuals and communities from all over the

Mediterranean world, and as a consequence the Church of the capital city contained congregations and presbyteries some of which were ethnically and regionally distinct, and divided by language, theology and liturgical practice. The history of Roman Christianity in the late first and early second century is rife with theological heterodoxy and schism, often focussed on incomers to the city from the provinces, like the gnostic leaders Valentinus and Marcion. And heresy apart, lesser regional variations were reflected within the institutional life of the Roman church. We know that even in the mid second century congregations within the city observed different customs and dates for the celebration of Easter, and even worshipped in different languages. When the Roman episcopate does eventually emerge clearly into the historical record in the mid-century, the maintenance of unity—maybe even the initial achievement of unity— within a diversity which threatened to become chaotic and formally schismatic, is already visibly one of its central preoccupations. The obscure Roman custom of the *fermentum*, the eucharistic particle exchanged between different congregations and mingled in the chalice as a sign of communion despite difference, is very possibly an abiding relic of this early search for unity. It was quite explicitly associated by Irenaeus with the attempts of the leaders of the Roman Church to maintain unity within diversity.⁹

This leaves us with the puzzle of the succession lists. How was it that Irenaeus and others came to believe that there had been a traceable succession of bishops from the time of the Apostles? And here I think the role of Clement and the other “foreign correspondents” becomes crucial. It is clear that from very early times the Roman Church exercised a ministry of care and material help to the other Churches of the Mediterranean, sending encouragement, money, advice and on occasion rebuke to other Christian communities, a ministry valued and accepted by other Churches as a continuation of the Apostolic presence within the Roman Church. It is not difficult to see how the presbyters responsible for sustaining these external contacts, and with them, what rapidly came to be recognised as the distinctive Apostolic charism of the Roman community as a whole, would come to occupy a central and indeed defining role in the life of that community. As episcopacy became the normative mode of government throughout the Christian Diaspora, it would be perfectly intelligible if the senior position among the presbyters of Rome should have become associated with the specifically ecumenical character of the Clementine office and succession, and if Clement and his predecessors and successors should have been

identified as the transmitters of the episcopal line in Rome.

None of this, of course, can be shown for certain. Reading historical evidence is not a purely subjective exercise, but it is a skill, for which some people have more aptitude than others, just as some people are better at recognising a tune. Fr Jones thinks that those of us who believe that the surviving evidence about the organisation of the early Roman church is one of complexity and potential chaos being resolved into coherence and unity round a single bishop, must, whatever we say to the contrary, be motivated by a “classic” Protestant theological agenda. He is convinced that we all share a floppy urge for non-clerical spontaneity, and secretly think that the emergence of the mono-episcopate as the fundamental form of Catholic Church government was, in the words of *1066 and All That*, “a bad thing”. It seems to me that the a-prioristic way in which he constructs the hypothetical “mindset” he deplores suggests that it is in fact he himself who is in the grip of theory, and who brings to the historical evidence a distorting mindset. I suspect that he feels that Catholic orthodoxy and church order will be compromised if it turns out that after all there was no pope in first-century Rome.

This is an understandable but, I think, mistaken anxiety. The apostolic character and truth of the Church is of course guarded and guaranteed by its pastors. But it inheres in the whole church. The exercise of *episcopate* is not dependent on the existence of individual bishops—well into the third century the presbyters of Rome cheerfully exercised that collective *episcopate* during vacancies of the see, writing letters of exhortation, rebuke and comfort to the Churches of Africa on behalf of the Church of Rome, as Clement had once done to Corinth.¹⁰ Catholic confidence in the apostolic succession within the Church does not turn on whether the inheritance of the apostles was transmitted by one man rather than many. We can, therefore, afford to be honest historians, and let the evidence lead us where it will. Maybe Fr Jones should loosen up.

1 *New Blackfriars*, March 1999, pp 128–43

2 E Duffy, *Saints and Sinners, a History of the Popes* (New Haven and London, 1997).

3 Jones, *art cit* p 128.

4 *ibid* p 142–3.

5 *Saints and Sinners* p 7.

6 Jones *art cit* p 135.

7 *ibid* p 140.

8 H J Leon, *The Jews of Ancient Rome* (Philadelphia 1960); Peter Lampe, *Die Stadtrömischen Christen in den ersten Jahrhunderten*, (Tübingen 1987).

9 See my discussion of this material in *Saints and Sinners* pp 11–2.

10 *ibid.* p 13.