

Extra Biblical References from 3 Early Church Fathers

~Regarding Various Thoughts on Leadership in an Assembly

The following excerpts are presented - not as authoritative - but for general interest. Several of the earliest leaders in the early Christian church from whom any written record remains are by Clement, Polycarp, and Ignatius. I have included several of their comments in regards to some comments they made about church leadership.

Disclaimer: Not all of my facts may be 100% correct. I compiled this info from the internet, relying heavily on Wikipedia.

1) **Polycarp of Smyrna** (born 69?- died 155?)

Polycarp was an overseer at Smyrna. He supposedly knew and conversed with some of the apostles, and also with many who had seen the resurrected Lord. He was allegedly directly appointed an overseer *by* apostles. Iranaeus, a student of Polycarp, recounted how he (as a youngster) had listened to Polycarp tell about how he talked with the Apostle John.

There is only one surviving work we have from Polycarp which is a letter he wrote to the Philippians from Smyrna. It is a fairly short letter and can be read online. Below are some excerpts from several things he mentioned in the letter regarding elders [presbyters].

Polycarp 1: (Introduction)

“Polycarp and the presbyters [elders] with him, to the church of God, the one temporarily residing in Philippi. Mercy to you and peace from God the all-powerful and Jesus Christ our Savior be multiplied.”

Polycarp 31-34:

“Therefore it is necessary to refrain from all these things [sinful passions], being subject to the presbyters and deacons as to God and Christ...

...And the presbyters [must] also [be] compassionate, merciful to all, turning back those who have gone astray, caring for all sick, neglecting neither widow or orphan or poor but always taking thought for the good before God and people, refraining from all anger, partiality, unjust judgment, being far removed from all love of money, not quickly believing against anyone, not relentless in judgment, understanding that we are all debtors [in the matter of] sin.”

2) Clement of Rome (born ? – died circa 100 ad)

Clement was an overseer in the Roman church. It is believed he knew Peter [Peter was also an overseer in Rome before being martyred in 67ad]. Between the time Peter and Clement were overseers in Rome, it is thought there were two other overseers: Linus and Anacletus.

Clement's only verifiable surviving written record is a letter he wrote to the church in Corinth, titled Clement 1. A lengthy letter (twice as long as Hebrews), it was written between 75-110 AD, after the Apostolic age, but during the time when men directly appointed by Apostles were still in leadership. The subject of the letter regards a situation where several elders had been [apparently] wrongfully removed from office in the church in Corinth.

Of interest to our study on elders, Clement 1 uses the terms bishop (overseer) and presbyter (elder) interchangeably. He also advocated a "rule of succession" (44:2).

Some excerpts:

Clement 1, Chapter 42

42:1 The Apostles received for us the gospel from our Lord Jesus Christ; our Lord Jesus Christ received it from God.

42:2 Christ, therefore, was sent out from God, and the Apostles from Christ; and both these things were done in good order, according to the will of God.

42:3 They, therefore, having received the promises, having been fully persuaded by the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, and having been confirmed by the word of God, with the full persuasion of the Holy Spirit, went forth preaching the good tidings that the kingdom of God was at hand.

42:4 Preaching, therefore, through the countries and cities, they appointed their firstfruits to be bishops [overseer] and deacons over such as should believe, after they had proved them in the Spirit.

42:5 And this they did in no new way, for in truth it had in long past time been written concerning bishops and deacons; for the scripture, in a certain place, saith in this wise: I will establish their bishops in righteousness, and their deacons in faith.

Clement 1, Chapter 44

44:1 Our Apostles, too, by the instruction of our Lord Jesus Christ, knew that strife would arise concerning the dignity of a bishop;

44:2 and on this account, having received perfect foreknowledge, they appointed the above-mentioned as bishops and deacons: and then gave a rule of succession, in order that, when they had fallen asleep, other men, who had been approved, might succeed to their ministry.

44:3 Those who were thus appointed by them, or afterwards by other men of good repute, with the consent of the whole Church, who have blamelessly ministered to the flock of Christ with humility, quietly, and without illiberality, and who for a long time have obtained a good report from all, these, we think, have been unjustly deposed from the ministry. [Referring to the situation at Corinth where elders had been removed from office, apparently unfairly]

44:4 For it will be no small sin in us if we depose from the office of bishop those who blamelessly and piously have made the offerings.

44:5 Happy are the presbyters who finished their course before, and died in mature age after they had borne fruit; for they do not fear lest any one should remove them from the place appointed for them.

44:6 For we see that ye have removed some men of honest conversation from the ministry, which had been blamelessly and honourably performed by them.

3) Ignatius of Antioch (born 35? – died around 100? perhaps a little later)

Ignatius was a bishop of Antioch and is believed to have been a student of the Apostle John. The surviving works we have from Ignatius are 7 letters. These were all written shortly before he died while traveling to Rome (under guard) where he was martyred in the coliseum, eaten by lions.

His writings definitely imply that by this time in church history (around 100ad) there were already a number of congregations being led by a single overseer. Ignatius stressed high importance be attached to a bishop [overseer], as you will observe in the quotes below.

Each of his letters are fairly short and reveal evidence of having been hastily written. They can be read online. Below are some selected excerpts from his epistles to Philadelphia and Smyrna that particularly deal with oversight in an assembly:

Philadelphia 4:1

“Be diligent, therefore, to use one eucharist, for there is one flesh of our Lord Jesus Christ, and one cup, for union with his blood; one altar, even as there is one bishop, together with the presbytery and the deacons, who are my fellow-servants, to the end that whatever ye do, ye may do it according unto God.”

Philadelphia 7:1

”For even though some have held that I was a deceiver according to the flesh, yet the Spirit, being of God, is not deceived; for he knoweth from whence he cometh, and whither he goeth, and he searcheth out hidden things. I cried while I was among you, and spake with a loud voice, saying, Give heed unto the bishop, and to the presbyters, and to the deacons.”

Philadelphia 7:2

“Do nothing apart from the bishop; keep your flesh as the temple of God; love unity, avoid divisions; be imitators of Jesus Christ, even as he is of his Father.”

Smyrna Chapter 8

“See that you all follow the bishop [overseer], even as Jesus Christ does the Father, and the presbytery [elder] as you would the apostles; and reverence the deacons, as being the institution of God. Let no man do anything connected with the Church without the bishop. Let that be deemed a proper Eucharist, which is [administered] either by the bishop, or by one to whom he has entrusted it. Wherever the bishop shall appear, there let the multitude [of the people] also be; even as, wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church [the first mention of this word in early church writings, literally meaning “universal”]. It is not lawful without the bishop either to baptize or to celebrate a love-feast; but whatsoever he shall approve of, that is also pleasing to God, so that everything that is done may be secure and valid.”