

# Was Peter the First Bishop of Rome?

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The question of whether Peter was indeed the first bishop of Rome has recently gained popular prominence in the United States due to the best seller by historian and papal critic Garry Wills who vigorously dismisses the entire idea as myth. Although simplistically and sensationally presented, Wills' thesis relies on the view of many, albeit more subtle, critical scholars that Peter could not have been a bishop at Rome because there were no bishops in Rome until the middle of the second century A.D. Several years ago, David Albert Jones O.P., challenged in this journal this common view of episcopacy in the first century.<sup>1</sup> One scholar, Francis Sullivan S.J., recently responded specifically to Jones' challenge by reaffirming the apparent majority view.<sup>2</sup> This article will briefly refer to Sullivan's critique of Jones, and will present in a new light the New Testament evidence showing that Jones' questioning of the reigning critical view is indeed well-founded and long overdue.

The heart of Jones' challenge is highlighting the flawed assumptions underlying the reasoning used to deny a first century episcopate: 1) the ideological tendency to view apostolic ministry as "free, loose, inspired and lay" while seeing "the emergence of clerical forms as a fall from primitive innocence" (Jones, p. 142); and 2) the denial of the existence of a first century episcopate based on the alleged silence of early documents. In essence, Jones rightly detects a pervasive bias in the critical literature against developed church structure as somehow contaminating the springtime of apostolic Christianity. As a result, many critical scholars refuse to recognize the New Testament evidence for the early episcopate. This bias fits well the emphasis in some contemporary theological circles on democratizing the Church under the rubric "collegiality." But, of course, as Jones points out, this view first arose as part of the old Protestant idea that the biblical church was fatally corrupted by later structural developments in Catholicism.

The mindset identified by Jones becomes most apparent in the critical literature's consistently limiting the term "bishop" to a quite narrow and anachronistic definition. Explicitly or implicitly, the scholars denying a first century episcopate will usually define "bishop" as denoting "a solitary permanent resident church administrator for one

city.” On its face, this definition is quite narrow and rigid. In fact, it is anachronistic in the sense of projecting back into the first century a definition that is so narrow that it results in the a priori exclusion from serious consideration of most of the uses of *episkopos* or bishop in the first century documents at issue, namely, the New Testament and Clement’s First Letter to the Corinthians (I Clement) written from Rome circa 95 A.D.

To Sullivan’s credit, he explicitly defines, unlike some others, his narrow description of a bishop: “A ‘bishop’ is a residential pastor who presides in a stable manner over the church in a city and its environs” (Sullivan, p. 14). What Sullivan left out, but assumes throughout his book, is that the title bishop can apply to only *one* such residential pastor per city. What this arbitrary definition, promulgated without discussion, does is to automatically exclude any apostle as a bishop because the apostles, especially Peter and Paul, were primarily missionaries moving from place to place founding new churches. Thus, by means of a rigid and arbitrary definition, the debate about first century bishops is fatally skewed from the beginning toward upholding the established critical view. Moreover, when a first century document fails to speak explicitly of bishops in this particular narrow sense, the document is said to be “silent” about the episcopacy. And this alleged “silence” is then interpreted as proving the nonexistence of a first century episcopate. Ironically, after foisting this anachronistic definition on the debate, these same scholars will in turn label any attempt to call an apostle a bishop— not surprisingly— anachronistic! The end result is that any attempt to go back to the first century texts themselves to see how they define a bishop is rejected because the definition is already predetermined.

Thus, the first step in viewing the entire matter in a new light is to undo the hijacking of the term “bishop” by letting the first century texts themselves define a first century bishop and to see if this new definition would include an apostle like Peter. If so, then there is no plausible basis to deny Peter’s status as the first or founding bishop of Rome.

Jones begins this effort to return to the texts by noting that “of the five New Testament occurrences of *episkopos* in the sense of an office holder, three are in the singular . . .”(Jones, p. 131). In response, Sullivan demurs and says that he can find only two such instances of *episkopos* in the singular: I Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:7 (Sullivan, p. 219). Jones unfortunately limited his reference to singular occurrences of *episkopos* used “in the sense of an office holder,” which allows Sullivan to exclude the singular reference to Christ as bishop in I Peter 2:25. The exclusion of the reference to Christ is unwarranted. The

highly significant use of *episkopos* in reference to Christ cannot but tell us something important about what “bishop” meant to first century Christians when applied to their fellow Christians. In any event, Jones’ argument is that the use of the singular allows us to infer “mono-episcopacy,” which he defines as referring to “the chief presbyter overseeing the local church” (Jones, p. 132). It is worth noting that Jones does not argue that only the chief presbyter was called bishop in the first century, but rather that “it is one possible use of the term even then, and one that would later become standard” (Jones, p. 132).

While agreeing with Jones’ quite reasonable and path-breaking argument, my own approach is broader. Why not look at all five occurrences of *episkopos*, whether singular or plural, to derive a first century definition of bishop? Sullivan and other scholars place much emphasis on whether references to church offices in the New Testament are in the singular or the plural as indicating the stark alternatives of either collegial or one-man rule. I submit that it is more logical to focus instead on first defining what bishop meant in the first century in order to judge later the significance, if any, of using the plural or the singular in a particular context. It may be that a genuinely first century definition does not necessarily pose the stark alternatives assumed by many scholars.

As stated by Jones and documented by Raymond Brown, there are five occurrences of *episkopos* referring to a “supervisor, overseer, superintendent, [or] bishop” in the New Testament: Acts 20:28 (plural); Philippians 1:1 (plural); I Timothy 3:2 (singular); Titus 1:7 (singular); I Peter 2:25 (singular).<sup>3</sup> But this short list is incomplete for our purposes. The related word *episkope* referring to the office or position of a supervisor or bishop is also found in I Timothy 3:1 in connection with the use of *episkopos* in I Timothy 3:2 (Brown, p. 323). *Episkope* is also found in Acts 1:20, Luke 19:44, and I Peter 2:12. In addition, Brown documents the verb form *episkopein* meaning “to supervise, oversee, inspect, care for” as occurring in I Peter 5:2 and Hebrews 12:15 (Brown, p. 323). The challenge is to compose a first century definition of a bishop, his office, and his function by considering all of these occurrences. This approach is quite different from the excessively analytical method of much scholarly discussion. In other words, we are trying to construct a definition, not deconstruct the text into unrelated pieces.

Yet, there is even more to consider because any discussion of a bishop implicates discussion of pastor or shepherd. Thus, New Testament references to church leaders as shepherds must also be taken into account in order to understand first century references to

bishops, especially when considering the role of Peter (John 21:15-17) (Brown, p. 325). Moreover, the term presbyter cannot be ignored since many scholars agree and, most importantly, the texts themselves (including several texts listed above plus I Timothy 5:17) indicate a tendency to use presbyter and bishop interchangeably (Brown, p. 333). Thus, there is a wealth of New Testament passages to consider in formulating a definition of bishop in the first century. Any *a priori* attempt to limit the scope of texts to be considered should be resisted, whether such an attempt is based on number (singular or plural) or on the precise word use involved (e.g., use as a noun referring to a person in contrast to a function, or use as a verb). Only by avoiding such arbitrary limits can we be faithful to the texts themselves as opposed to following mere convention.

If we consider Acts 1:20, we see Peter explaining that a replacement for Judas Iscariot is needed. Peter quotes the Psalms stating: "His office let another take." (Unless stated otherwise, all scriptural references are to the Revised Standard Version or RSV.) The word translated as "office" is *episkope* referring to the office of bishop. In the Authorized Version, the translation is "his bishopric let another take." *Episkope* is the same word used in I Timothy 3:1: "If anyone aspires to the office of bishop, he desires a noble task." I Timothy 3:2 then continues this line of thought by using *episkopos* in the familiar passage: "Now a bishop must be above reproach. ..."

Thus, in Acts 1:20, Peter ties the office of apostle vacated by Judas to the office of supervisor or bishop. The same word used by Peter in Acts is then used in I Timothy to refer to a local church leader. This convergence contradicts the attempts by some to totally divorce the functions of an apostle from that of a bishop. The sensible inference is that the office of apostle includes the function of a bishop. Once this perspective is adopted, the idea that Peter could not possibly have been a bishop in Rome becomes implausible. In addition, it is legitimate to compare the use of these terms in Acts and in the Pastoral Epistles because both sets of documents appear to have originated at the end of the first century.<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, in I Peter 5:1, Peter refers to himself as a "fellow elder" or presbyter. Even if, as some speculate, Peter did not write this epistle himself, we have at the minimum a first century disciple of Peter calling Peter a presbyter, probably in the time period 70 to 90 A.D. (Brown Intro., p. 706). As stated before, critical scholars customarily point out how *episkopos* and presbyter are used interchangeably in the New Testament. This usage is also apparent in I Peter. In the next verse, I Peter 5:2, the presbyters or elders are exhorted to "tend the flock of

God.” Although disputed, the RSV notes that some ancient authorities add *episkopein* to this verse to signify “exercising the oversight.” Given the reference to both elder and the exercise of oversight in this passage, Peter is in effect identified by himself or by a close disciple as a presbyter-bishop. Even if we ignore the disputed presence of *episkopein*, it remains true that presbyter and *episkopos* appear to be used interchangeably at other points in the New Testament and in I Clement. This usage makes it difficult to accept the thesis that Peter would not have been considered a bishop or *episkopos* while resident in Rome.

Further reinforcement for this conclusion comes from the use of *episkopein* in Hebrews 12:15 to urge Christians to “[s]ee to it [*episkopountes*] that no one fail to obtain the grace of God; that no ‘root of bitterness’ spring up and cause trouble, and by it the many become defiled.” Although a general charge to all Christians, it is a charge especially suitable to the mission of bishops to maintain “sound doctrine” and “to confute those who contradict it,” as described in Titus 1:7-15. It is a role that Peter dramatically carried out in Acts 5:1-6, in “striking down unworthy members of the community” (Brown, p. 325). Again, all of these documents appear to date from the latter part of the first century.

Also in I Peter is the reference to Christ as “the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls”(1 Peter 2:25). The word translated in the RSV as “Guardian” is none other than *episkopos*. The Authorized Version is more revealing than the RSV of the underlying Greek text by translating *episkopos* as bishop. This reference to Christ as Bishop is important because critical scholars have a tendency to say that an apostle like Peter could not have been a mere administrator as they say *episkopos* implies. Yet, here is *episkopos* applied to Christ and thus clearly not limited to a mere functionary or some sort of lower level administrator of church finances or goods. As a result, it becomes even more plausible that Peter the leader of the apostles would have been called *episkopos* in first century Rome.

Calling Christ a bishop is significant, because in John 21:15-17, Christ commissions Peter to feed and tend his sheep. Accordingly, it would be natural to view the same Peter that succeeds Christ as shepherd of the sheep as also succeeding Christ as *episkopos*. This natural connection is unavoidable given that 1 Peter 2:25 calls Christ both Shepherd and Bishop of souls. In addition, as noted before, in 1 Peter 5:2, some authorities tie the exhortation for elders to shepherd the flock to the idea of exercising oversight (*episkopein*). Thus, there is an undeniable interrelation between the idea of shepherd, elder, and *episkopos*. As to dates of composition, the Gospel of John, like I Peter,

is usually dated to the late first century, although Brown believes that John 21 was “perhaps” added to the gospel in the time period 100 to 110 A.D. (Brown Intro., pp. 374-376). Even under this later and admittedly speculative dating, I submit that I Peter and John 21 are close enough in time to merit considering them together.

In addition to using *episkopos* to refer to Christ, *episkope* is translated as referring to God’s “visitation” in I Peter 2:12. In this instance, *episkope* is used in reference to God himself “visiting” mankind. A similar use is found in Luke 19:44. This use reinforces that neither *episkope* nor *episkopos* is limited to lower level administrative tasks unworthy of an apostle like Peter, and again makes it plausible that Roman Christians would not have hesitated to refer to Peter’s presence as *episkope*.

Reliance on I Peter to infer Roman usage is particularly appropriate given that I Peter is viewed as having been written in Rome itself (Brown Intro., p. 706). It is also noteworthy that Brown considers that “[o]f all the Catholic Epistles, I Peter has the best chance of being written by the figure to whom it is attributed”—Peter himself (Brown Intro., p. 718). If Peter did indeed write I Peter, the date of authorship is probably 60 to 63 A.D. (Brown, Intro., p. 706). Prior to this time, we already have the earliest use of *episkopos* in the New Testament dating to about 56 A.D. in Philippians 1:1, which, interestingly, is like I Peter in possibly originating from Rome (Brown Intro., p. 484). All of this information makes the notion of Peter as a bishop in Rome historically persuasive.

To summarize, a good first century definition of bishop would be that of a shepherd especially charged to forcefully protect the sound doctrine and peace of the local church. This is a role exercised by Peter, among others, in the New Testament. There is no reason to doubt that Peter exercised the same role while resident in Rome prior to his martyrdom. There is also no reason to doubt that the Roman Christians would have viewed and described Peter as *episkopos* in carrying out this function. In fact, a serious argument can be made that the Roman Christians would see the arrival of Peter as a highly significant visitation similar to the visitation of God referred to in Luke and Hebrews.

It is just plain common sense that, while in Rome, Peter would not have been just one more *episkopos* among many, but rather the chief or preeminent *episkopos*. It is even tempting to call him “archbishop” solely in the literal Greek sense of the chief *episkopos*, *archi-episkopos* (cf. I Peter 5:4). The undisputed chief of the apostles who struck down false Christians in Acts would clearly take a preeminently authoritative role in Rome. Thus, the existence of a group or college of presbyter-bishops does not exclude or minimize the role of Peter as the preeminent bishop. Jones makes this possibility plain: “In a community in which the

collegiate overseers were called *episkopoi*, there could still have been the *role* of head bishop, just as the same role existed in churches that used a different vocabulary” (Jones, p. 137). In the case of Peter, such a role is certainly much more than a mere possibility given his apostolic prestige and close connection to the events of the earthly ministry of Jesus.

Given the above, can we fairly add to Peter’s role as chief bishop of Rome the notion that he was the first or founding bishop of Rome? While it appears that Roman Christians predated Peter’s arrival in Rome,<sup>5</sup> there is no reason to deny early Church tradition that Peter along with Paul laid the foundation, through preaching and martyrdom, for the Church in Rome. To be precise, we can fairly say that Peter was the first or founding chief presbyter-bishop of the Church in Rome. This scenario raises the question of Paul’s role. Even those who would reject the thesis of this article admit that the early church made a distinction between Peter as “chief shepherd” and Paul as a teacher of doctrine.<sup>6</sup> This traditional view plus Peter’s preeminent role among the Twelve and his prominence in the events of Jesus’ earthly ministry make such a distinction between Peter and Paul credible. In addition, Paul himself acknowledged the special role of Peter, even in the tension of disagreement, as one who was considered a “pillar” of the church whose approval was highly desirable (see Galatians 2:9 & Brown Intro., p. 707).

All in all, this survey of the New Testament view of the interrelated identities of bishop, shepherd, and elder and the consideration of Peter’s leading role among the apostles yield persuasive evidence that the first century Roman Christians would not have hesitated to view Peter as the founding chief bishop or shepherd of the Roman church. Although denial of this evidence is common, the textual evidence for this conclusion remains persuasive.

- 1 David Albert Jones, O.P., “Was there a bishop of Rome in the first century?” *New Blackfriars* 80 (No. 937) (March 1999): 128 (hereafter “Jones”).
- 2 Francis A. Sullivan, S.J., *From Apostles to Bishops: The Development of the Episcopacy in the Early Church* (N.Y.: Newman Press 2001), 219-221 (hereafter “Sullivan”).
- 3 Raymond E. Brown, S.S., “*Episkope* and *Episkopos*: The New Testament Evidence,” *Theological Studies* 41 (1980): 323 (hereafter “Brown”).
- 4 Raymond E. Brown, S.S., *An Introduction to the New Testament* (N.Y.: Doubleday 1997), 280, 668 (hereafter “Brown Intro.”).
- 5 J.M.R. Tillard, O.P., *The Bishop of Rome* (Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, Inc. 1983), 83.
- 6 Garry Wills, *Why I am a Catholic* (N.Y.: Houghton Mifflin Co. 2002), 75-76.