

Elders as Honored Household Heads and Not Holders of “Office” in Earliest Christianity

John H. Elliott

Continued debate over the origin, shapes, and historical development of ministry and order in the early church appears to be as much an inevitability as death and taxes. Perhaps this is to be expected with an issue in which all ecclesial communions have such pronounced self-interests in justifying their own ecclesial orders. At the same time, the diverse and numerous exegetical, historical, social, and theological factors involved, combined with the less than fully clear nature of the literary sources, virtually guarantees a plethora of differing reconstructions, none of which has led yet to an overall consensus.

A recent contribution to this debate is the study of R. Alastair Campbell, *THE ELDERS: SENIORITY WITHIN EARLIEST CHRISTIANITY*, published by T&T Clark in 1994. This edited version of Campbell's London doctoral dissertation, written under the supervision of Graham Stanton, while focusing needed attention to the role of elders in the early church, is actually more comprehensive in scope and proposes a new reconstruction of the development of ministry in the early church down through the Apostolic Fathers. In emphasizing the household matrix of ministry, Campbell sketches a course of development that is aimed at displacing a previous consensus influenced initially by the work of the German jurist Rudolf Sohm (1841–1917, especially Sohm's *KIRCHENRECHT* [Leipzig: Duncker und Humbolt, 1892]), then elaborated by Hans von Campenhausen (*ECCLESIASTICAL AUTHORITY AND SPIRITUAL POWER IN THE CHURCH OF THE FIRST THREE CENTURIES* [London: Black, 1969]) and adopted by subsequent “neo-Sohmians” including Ernst Käsemann, Karl Kertelge, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, and James Dunn among others.

This consensus, as described by Campbell (pp. 1–19; 236–37), has held that the history of ministry and order in the early church was marked by polarities of leadership patterns, theological tensions, and an eventual decline into hierarchical institutionalism. Building on Sohm's Protestant-inspired contrast of spirit and law, charisma and office, and a notion that an originally charismatic community eventually degenerated into a legalistic institution,

von Campenhausen and other “neo-Sohmians” postulated a polarity between egalitarian Pauline churches led by charismatically endowed persons and Jewish-Christian communities led by elders allegedly following the “model” of the synagogue. These office-holding elders were guardians of tradition and harbingers of an “official” and “ecclesiastical” way of thinking. After Paul's death, charismatic leaders disappeared and Pauline overseers and deacons were merged with Jewish-Christian elders to produce a threefold pattern of ministry out of which institutional, degenerate, clerical Catholicism was born.

Campbell challenges this view and offers a counter theory based on the household matrix of the early churches and their leaders. He develops a neglected aspect of Sohm's theory, namely that the elders were never the holders of office in the church but, like elders everywhere, were always persons of leading households and clans who were honored in their communities as “senior members of proven Christian character” (p. 9).

Focusing first on these elders (chs. 2–3), he surveys the evidence on elders in Israel (pp. 20–66) and in Greco-Roman society (pp. 67–98). In Israel, it is noted, the consistent reference to elders in the plural indicates that “‘the elders’ is a collective term for the leadership of the tribe or the ruling class, but never the title of an office to which an individual might be appointed” (p. 26). “The elders are the senior men of the community, heads of leading families

John H. Elliott, Dr. Theol. (Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität, Münster, Germany), an Associate Editor of *BTB*, author of numerous publications including *A HOME FOR THE HOMELESS: A SOCIAL-SCIENTIFIC CRITICISM OF 1 PETER, ITS SITUATION AND STRATEGY* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1981/1990), *WHAT IS SOCIAL-SCIENTIFIC CRITICISM* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), and *1 PETER: A NEW TRANSLATION WITH INTRODUCTION AND COMMENTARY* (Anchor Bible 37B, New York, NY: Doubleday, 2000), is Professor Emeritus of Theology and Religious Studies, University of San Francisco, San Francisco, CA 94117-1080 (e-mail: elliottj@usfca.edu).

within it, who as such exercise an authority that is informal, representative and collective” (p. 65). “Eldership connotes not only age but also wisdom and honor deriving from the prestige of the families whose heads they were (p. 66). In Greco-Roman society, the nature and status of elders was similar, though the preferred term for the ruling oligarchy was *hoi gerontes* rather than *hoi presbyteroi* (p. 95). The sole place where *hoi presbyteroi* appears as a title of office is in papyri from Egypt where the term refers to “local authorities and village officials” (p. 75). Along the way, Campbell offers a brief but trenchant critique of E. Schüssler Fiorenza (IN MEMORY OF HER—1983) and her theory of Jesus’ alleged egalitarianism and rejection of familial and patriarchal structures (pp. 16–17, 154–55).

In chapters four through seven Campbell turns to the New Testament and the Apostolic Fathers and extends the study to include other terms and forms of leadership as well. All forms of leadership, he stresses, were determined by the household structure of the earliest Christian groups and the house churches, including not only *presbyteroi* but also *episkopoi* (overseers).

Paul (pp. 97–140) made no mention of elders, but this is no indication that he did not know of, or opposed, leadership by elders, for local village leadership by elders was in place throughout Paul’s world. His familiarity with elders Campbell finds implied in Acts 14:23 and 20:17–38; and nothing in Paul’s teaching about *charism*, he claims, is incompatible with the presence and functioning of elders in his churches (contra the consensus view) (pp. 102–11). In contrast to the consensus view which, following the classic typology of Max Weber, takes Paul’s references to *charismata* as indicative of a concrete social form of leadership distinct from traditional or legal-rational authority, Campbell argues that “*charisma*, for Paul, is a *theological* interpretation [emphasis added], a value he places on all service rendered to the community, whether exceptional or routine” (p. 103). In describing various services in the church as *charismata* (Rom 12:6–8, 1 Cor 12:4–11), Paul’s aim was to affirm *theologically* that these agents were all endowed with the grace of God and thus had *divine* as well as social legitimation. Thus leadership by elders should not be seen as a pattern borrowed from the synagogue as a replacement for charismatic leaders following Paul (contra the consensus view), but as a natural development of their status as respected heads of the households in which the believers assembled for worship from the very outset of the messianic movement.

Paul, according to Campbell, spoke of these householders from his own missionary perspective, describing

them variously as *kopiountoi*, *proistamenoï*, *nouthetountes* (1 Thess 5:12; Rom 12:8, 16:2), *synergountes* (cf. 1 Cor 16:16), and *episkopoi* and *diakonoi* (Phil 1:1) “who were the equivalent of elders in all but name” (p. 126). Thus, Campbell postulates, *presbyteroi* and *episkopoi* should be viewed as virtually synonymous terms for household heads, with the former term indicating status and the latter term, function. The overseer (*mebaqqer*) mentioned in the Qumran writings (CD, 1QS), Campbell conjectures, provided the prototype for the Christian *episkopos* and the term *mebaqqer* for the Christian household heads in Aramaic-speaking areas was naturally rendered *episkopos* in Greek-speaking churches, as in Phil 1:1 (pp. 123–25, 158, 173, 242).

It was the change in social situation after Paul’s death, Campbell asserts, that brought about a change in nomenclature. The combination of Paul’s missionary perspective and the household structure of the earliest churches explains why calling persons “the elders” was “inappropriate in the first generation and inevitable in the second” (p. 126). As the number of individual house churches increased and the individual *episkopoi*/overseers gathered for deliberation, they eventually were identified *collectively* as “the elders,” i.e. *episkopoi* “considered together and acting corporately” (p. 204; cf. also 238–46). The title “the elders” was not used in the first generation when churches were small and confined to one household, but appeared in the second generation when “leaders of house-churches would need to relate and act together in a *representative* [and *collective*] capacity” (p. 130). Calling the overseers “the elders” spoke of the respect they enjoyed as fathers (and perhaps mothers) in the church, the household of God (1 Tim 3:15), and “the qualities such persons were expected to display, both before and after they were appointed. Overseers should be elders: mature, wise, able to teach and ‘parent’ the church” (259). “No one would think of calling the head of the household ‘the elder,’ for the simple reason that . . . ‘elder’ normally occurs in the plural and ‘the elders’ would thus be a *collective title* for the leaders of the several households acting together” (p. 130, emphasis added).

Evidence from Acts (pp. 141–75), which Campbell considers historically reliable, records the existence of both house churches and the leadership role of householders. Here too, Campbell argues, the term “elders” was applied to persons of honor and repute (not office-holders) and the expression “the elders” referred *collectively* to the leaders of individual house churches. The “appointing” of these elders (Acts 14:23) does not mean “ordaining to an

office,” but “blessing” and “commendation” to God (pp. 168–70). The equation of “elders” and “overseers” (*episkopoi*) is explicit in Acts 20:17, 28 and implicit in Acts 14:23 (p. 173).

The Pastorals (pp. 176–205), contrary to the consensus view, do not manifest a merger of two different types of order (presbyteral and episkopal), since “there did not exist two opposed forms of church government needing to be reconciled” (p. 193). From Jerusalem onwards “the churches were nurtured in homes, [and] received oversight from their familial *episkopoi*, who were naturally known by the collective title of *presbyteroi*” (p. 193). The Pastorals rather were written “to legitimate the authority of the new overseer . . . a single shepherd, with the title of *episkopos*, as leader of those who as *episkopoi* in their own households were already known as the elders in relation to the local church as a whole” (p. 196). Such a single *episkopos* (Titus 1:7, 1 Tim 3:2), who was chosen from the ranks of the *presbyteroi* (Titus 1:5), became necessary when there were several churches in a town and when churches now “bereft of apostolic oversight and threatened with distunity and dissent” required one person to act in the stead of the apostle in overseeing all the churches of a given town (p. 204).

R. Alastair Campbell, THE ELDERS: SENIORITY WITHIN EARLIEST CHRISTIANITY. STUDIES OF THE NEW TESTAMENT AND ITS WORLD. Edinburgh, UK: T & T Clark, 1994. Pp. xiv + 309. Cloth, \$43.95.

Summing up the development taking place through the time of the Pastorals, Campbell sees leadership developing in three successive historical and social stages: *kat' oikon*, *kat' ekklēsian*, and *kata polin*. “At the first stage, when the apostle is still exercising oversight, and the numbers of believers and households is small, the local leaders are called, at least by some people in some places, *episkopoi* “(*kat' oikon*) and there is no mention of *presbyteroi* (1 Thess; 1 Cor). “At the second stage, where the households are multiplying and the various household leaders are having to act collectively, they are called *presbyteroi*” (*kat' ekklēsian*, Acts 13:1–3; 20:17–38). At the third stage, represented by the Pastorals (and Ignatius), “*episkopos* comes to refer to the overall leader of a group of house-churches in a town” (*kata polin*) (p. 204 with table on p. 205).

In other NT writings (James, 1 Peter, 1–3 John, Revelation, pp. 206–09) Campbell finds nothing to contradict these conclusions (p. 206). In his regrettably brief

and deficient examination of 1 Peter, however, Campbell unconvincingly sees the author as a “*monepiskopos*” addressing the *presbyteroi* (5:1–4) as “office-holders” and possibly “*monepiskopoi*,” presaging the monepiscopacy subsequently advocated by Ignatius. This notion, however, runs counter to the content and terminology of 1 Peter 5:1–5a, where the author identifies himself as a “co-elder” (*sympresbyteros*, 5:1) and encourages the elders/leaders (*presbyteroi*, 5:1) to “shepherd the flock of God among you by exercising oversight” (*episkopountes*) in an appropriate fashion (5:3). Mention is made here not of a single *episkopos* or *monepiskopoi*, but rather of elders all exercising oversight—a situation quite distinct from that of Ignatius, who differentiates the single *episkopos* from the subordinate *presbyteroi* and *diakonoi*. 1 Peter 5:1–4 and its household setting should have been used in tandem with the similar constellation of terms in Acts 20:17–38 (especially 20:17, 28, 29) to bolster his argument concerning the household setting of the *presbyteroi* in his proposed second stage (cf. the diagram on p. 205).

Chapter seven treats 1 CLEMENT, Ignatius of Antioch, HERMAS and the DIDACHE (pp. 210–35). Clement, equating *presbyteroi* and *episkopoi* (p. 212), combats a Corinthian attempt at establishing a monepiscopate and a demotion of other *presbyteroi* as an impiety and a lack of respect for the demoted elders. HERMAS, like Clement, equates *episkopoi* and *presbyteroi* and knows nothing of a monepiscopate; here *episkopoi* are still leaders of individual house churches in Rome (pp. 225–25). By contrast, Ignatius, following the lead of the Pastorals, in the interest of doctrinal and social unity, distinguishes the *episkopos* (singular and now translated “bishop”) from the presbyters (and deacons) and insists on the subordination of the latter to the former (pp. 216–22). In the DIDACHE, finally, the “bishops [sic] and deacons” who are to be appointed (15:1–2) are not household *episkopoi kat' oikon* and are not equated with *presbyteroi*, but are, as in the Pastorals, *episkopoi kata polin* (i.e. in their various cities) (pp. 225–28). Why this is the case in the DIDACHE and why Campbell abruptly translates *episkopos* in Ignatius as “bishop” (implying a title) instead of “overseer” (implying function) is not clarified.

Two main conclusions drawn from this analysis (pp. 246–54) are that “the elders are those who bear a title of honor, not of office, a title that is imprecise, collective and representative, and rooted in the ancient family or household” (p. 246). Secondly, modern scholars “have greatly exaggerated the diversity of the early church’s patterns of ministry” (p. 252) and the alleged polarity between charismatic leaders and elders-leaders. When the household matrix of the early Christian movement is adequately

appreciated, “a rather uniform pattern of church organization becomes evident” (p. 253). Initially household heads presided over individual house churches, with *diakonoï* assisting them when necessary. With the multiplication of house churches and the need of householders to confer, these householders were collectively designated “the elders,” a term of honor for persons of prestigious families. At a still later time when the Twelve and Paul are no longer part of the picture and the unity of the churches is under internal or external threat, “the congregations come together in one place under one overseer, with the consequent loss of status by the leaders who no longer lead their own meetings” (p. 253). This proposed process took place at different paces in different places.

The study concludes with brief observations on the implications of this study for ministry today (pp. 254–60), a bibliography and indices (pp. 261–309).

Given the complex and controverted nature of the issues addressed in this study, it is inevitable that any attempt at a “fresh explanation” of the data will be more convincing on some points than on others, and this work is no exception.

On the one hand, Campbell presents a cogent critique of the fallacious idealism driving the Sohmian and neo-Sohmian views, which, he objects, mistake theological ideas for social realities and imagine more polarities in leadership than can actually be demonstrated (pp. 100–14, 238–46). In regard to the expression “the elders,” he does well to remind us that this was “an imprecise, inclusive, term of respect” for persons whose prestige derived from their seniority relative to others within the household and that it never entailed a holding of “office” (pp. 95–96 and *passim*). In pointing out the household matrix of the role and function of elders as respected household heads, he makes clear why in the earliest house churches its leaders were known as “elders” and why this term should not be seen as derived exclusively from Israel and the synagogue (pp. 117–20).

On the other hand, Campbell’s claim that from the outset of the Jesus movement householders of individual house churches also were known alternatively as *episkopoi* is based on no more than a guess. Proceeding from the observation of Paul’s reference to *episkopoi* in Philippians 1:1, Campbell opines, as already noted, that a similarity of the *episkopos*/overseer to the role of the *mebaqqer*/overseer in the Qumran community (CD 13:9–10; 1QS) establishes this *mebaqqer* as the likely model for the Christian overseer “in Aramaic-speaking areas” and that “in Greek-speaking churches this would translate naturally into *episkopos*” (pp. 157–58). This, however, is a web of speculation supported by no clear New Testament or linguistic

evidence. Only in later NT writings of a diaspora provenance do we find evidence of the synonymous use of the terms *presbyteroi* and *episkopoi* (Acts 20:17–38, especially 20:17, 28; Tit 1:5, 9) or mention of *presbyteroi* exercising oversight (1 Pet 5:1–2, *episkopountes*). Prior to these texts there is no mention of a singular *episkopos* as leader of a single household. The contention that “the elders” was always and only a designation for *episkopoi* acting collectively (pp. 160, 162, 206, 242–44, 260, and *passim*), also is open to serious question, especially in the light of 1 Timothy 5:19, 2 John 1, and 3 John 1 where *presbyteros*, surely designating a church leader, occurs in the singular.

In contrast to Campbell, a more convincing case can be made that leaders of individual house churches in the diaspora, such as Stephanas in Corinth (1 Cor 16:15–16), were elders in fact if not in title, since like Stephanas they were seniors in the faith (“first-fruits”= earliest converts) and hence were regarded initially not as *episkopoi* (contra Campbell) but as *presbyteroi* (elder in both age and faith) (cf. John H. Elliott, *Ministry and Church Order in The New Testament: A Traditio-Historical Analysis* [1 P 5:1–5 plls.], CATHOLIC BIBLICAL QUARTERLY 32/3 [1970]: 367–91). If this is the case, the oldest, traditional form of authority in the Jesus movement was exercised by *presbyteroi*, not by *episkopoi*, and the case for *hoi presbyteroi* as a collective reference to *episkopoi* is further weakened. When the terms eventually were used in tandem, *presbyteros* denoted prestigious status (as Campbell rightly insists), and *episkopein* and *episkopos* connoted function—that of oversight.

In challenging the Sohmian view that the church was first led by charismatic figures, Campbell makes a useful distinction between *charisma* as (a) characteristic of a sociological type of leadership (à la Weber) and as (b) a Pauline theological affirmation that all forms of leadership and service of which Paul speaks are enabled and legitimated by God (pp. 102–06). All the Pauline references to *charismata*, Campbell insists, are to be taken only in the latter sense. In this connection, 1 Peter 4:8–11 could have been cited as a further instance where forms of mutual service are affirmed theologically as *charismata*, gifts of grace conferred by God upon all believers, with no distinction between “charismatic” leaders and other believers.

This does not, however, eliminate the utility of the Weberian concept of charismatic authority for analyzing types of leadership in the early church. As defined by Weber, this type of authority, distinct from both traditional authority (e.g., elders) and legal-rational authority (as typical of bureaucracies with “offices”) was a personal and evanescent form of authority rooted in the personal characteristics of an individual and dependent on the acknowl-

edgement of others. In the Jesus movement this form of leadership was exercised by Jesus, and other prophets and apostles like Paul. But about this type of leadership Campbell says virtually nothing. Accordingly, no attention is given to the possible tensions between such charismatic leaders and those based in the household, how these tensions may have been managed, and how charismatic authority fared in subsequent generations. Also left unconsidered is the matter of the social and historical conditions under which traditional modes of authority and informal roles and functions eventually became regularized and formalized in legal-rational forms of authority and “offices.”

Campbell correctly notes the inappropriateness of associating elders with the concept of “office.” When he distinguishes these elders (pp. 247–48), however, from what he calls actual “office-holders” (“kings, high priests, governors, *archisynagogo*i, *mebaqerim*, overseers, and deacons,” p. 247), he muddies the waters. For the latter also are not “office-holders” within a bureaucratic organization, but likewise agents exercising *traditional* forms of authority (as opposed to “charismatic” or “legal-rational” forms of authority). The appropriate distinction here is not between office-holders and non-office-holders, but between spheres or domains of authority, whether public and political or domestic and local.

From a social scientific perspective, the existence of “offices” presumes a bureaucratic institution and a legal-rational mode of authority distinguishable from both traditional modes of authority (e.g. “elders,” “patrons”) and exceptional charismatic authority (apostles, prophets, and healers). This classical theory of basic, differing types of domination/authority put forward by Max Weber, while long fundamental to sociological analysis, has yet to be adequately utilized by exegetes and ancient church historians, including Campbell. “Offices,” in contrast to less formally defined roles and functions, involve clearly delineated positions and accompanying responsibilities in a hierarchically organized administrative system, positions and responsibilities for which one qualifies by prescribed training and qualifications. “An office is a formally constituted position within a political or administrative system” (C. Seymour-Smith, *MACMILLAN DICTIONARY OF ANTHROPOLOGY* [London: Macmillan Reference Books, 1986], p. 211). “‘Office’ implies both a role and a status occupied by a specific individual for a certain time through a mandate from society” (Seymour-Smith: 211). An “office” differs from a social position “in that it has an independent existence which transcends that of the person who occupies it” (Seymour-Smith: 211). The existence of “offices” involves issues concerning rules of succession or election to office as

well as the manner in which legitimacy is conferred upon such office holders. While the church in later centuries, under the pressures of increased population and geographical dissemination, and diversity of teaching and practice, eventually assumed the form of a centralized and hierarchically organized structure, this was hardly the case in the first two centuries, which were marked by a diversity of leadership roles and functions, little homogeneity, and no centralization of authority. Thus, talk of “offices” with reference to the New Testament period is sociologically inaccurate and historically anachronistic. Certain late New Testament texts (the Pastorals) and writings including 1 CLEMENT and the letters of Ignatius reveal the *trend* toward the establishment of offices, but the diversity among even these texts in regard to nomenclature and ecclesial structures demonstrates the absence of any institutionalized order or standardized “offices.”

When Campbell states that “with the passage of time, there would be a tendency to appoint the gifted to office, and to expect office-holders to display gifts” (p. 251), his eagerness to minimize the difference between *charisma* and office (in opposition to Sohm and followers, cf. pp. 252–54) leads him to conflate two distinctly different sociological forms of authority without explaining how extraordinary, personal charismatic power and authority based on the personal qualities of an individual could have been transmitted and merged with ordinary, impersonal “offices”—a key problem in the controversy over *charisma* and office. By considering early church leaders as simultaneously traditional household heads and charismatically endowed persons, Campbell confuses—at least from a social scientific point of view—two ideal types of authority that are different if not diametrically opposed. The fact that charismatic leadership is by nature extraordinary, spontaneous, and inherently unstable, poses the problem of the routinization of *charisma*, i.e. how an extraordinary, unstable form of leadership eventually is transformed into, or supplanted by, an institutionalized bureaucracy and “offices.” This “how” includes questions of the social circumstances and processes involved in this development. These are sociological and historical issues that must be faced by all students of the development of ministry and church order. Unfortunately Campbell leaves this undiscussed.

While it is noted that the development of ministry and order proceeded differently at different places and times, more needs to be said about the social circumstances that accompanied and contributed to this diversity. The contrast Campbell notes between the positions of 1 CLEMENT and Ignatius is a case in point. What social factors may have had a bearing on Clement’s traditional posi-

tion and Ignatius' innovative advocacy of a threefold hierarchy? Does the apparent equivalency of elders and overseers in 1 CLEMENT suggest that in Corinth the churches had not multiplied throughout the city so as to require a single overseer to maintain unity, harmony, and order, even though Campbell assumes such growth had taken place at Ephesus and on Crete where, he maintains, there was need for a single overseer *kata polin*?

In Ignatius' case, what social factors prompted Ignatius' contrary preference for a *monepiskopos*? Campbell appears to agree with the consensus view that Ignatius' position on a hierarchy of "offices" and a *monepiskopate* bespeaks a significant social advance in the centralization of authority and ecclesial institutionalization. Do the letters supply evidence of this? Is it to be assumed on theoretical grounds? If so, according to what social theory of organization? How is this social advance to be envisioned and explained? This too cries out for some social-scientif-

ic reflection and analysis that Campbell fails to provide in his "socio-historical" analysis.

Anyone challenging entrenched views and proposing new perspectives on this complex subject must be aware that she/he is tiptoeing through a minefield. This reviewer admires Campbell's pluck and believes that some advance through the battle zone has been made. This includes his demonstration of the weaknesses of the Sohmian view, his highlighting of the household as the basic matrix for the exercise of community leadership, particularly by the elders, and his attempt at attending to social historical factors. Numerous other points, however, as indicated above, remain open to serious question since they are rooted more in supposition than demonstration. While its intent to investigate earliest Christianity as a "social phenomenon" (p. 5) is most welcome, a more rigorous analysis along social scientific lines might have led to a different assessment of the terrain and more compelling conclusions.

