

Reflection on the Episcopacy from a Biblical Perspective

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Introduction

When faced with an issue or concern, one impulse of Christians is to consult the Bible to see what it says about it. This is a good impulse, arising as it does out of the Christian affirmation that the Bible is the highest guide, the unfailing norm for faith and life. But, as much as Christians should be encouraged to soak up and be guided by Scripture, there can be pitfalls along the path.

Sadly, what sometimes happens when a question arises is that concordances are checked, lexicons consulted, and soon every scriptural mention of the relevant word is brought to bear directly upon the issue at hand, and so the question is laid to rest. That, at least, seems frequently to be the extent and intention of “consulting the Bible.” “If the Bible says it, then that’s enough for me.” Yet, things are seldom that simple. Even the task of determining what the Bible “says” is not always easy or straightforward, since it entails a whole raft of linguistic, historical, contextual, and hermeneutical questions. Instead of resolving arguments, “consulting the Bible” can sometimes increase the intensity of discussion, harden opposing opinions, and threaten the peace. It can be an enterprise fraught with risk and danger, one not to be undertaken lightly, but it can also be an exciting, meaningful and enriching adventure for Christians to take.

Knowing these things, then, here is an invitation to embark upon a journey centered upon how the New Testament can help us understand the episcopacy. It might not be an easy trip that provides simple answers. It will likely involve some complicated discussion. However, while I will try to take as many questions into account as possible, it is not my intention to imply that only an expert, someone who has been fully educated in all these areas, can take part in this adventure. “Consulting the Bible” should not be only for those with high levels of expertise or education. Important insights can come from any quarter and are to be valued. I make no claims for high levels of expertise in this area, and I am always delighted to learn from others how better to “consult the Bible.”

An Etymological Journey: Cognates and Their Background

“Consulting the Bible” on the issue of the episcopacy, of bishops and their role in the church, should first involve going back to the Greek words from which the English words come, and to their background in Hellenistic culture and the Septuagint (LXX), the most commonly used Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible in the last centuries before the Common Era.¹

According to the Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (TDNT), the basic verb related to this topic is *episkeptomai* (επισκεπτομαι), which had a wide range of meanings in Hellenistic Greek, among which was “looking down,” as of the gods looking down upon human activity. Another secular Greek meaning of *episkeptomai* was “visit,” and this meaning was taken over in the Septuagint, as, for example, in Judges 15:1, when Samson “visited” his wife (και εβησε, yato Samywn th.n gunai/ka auvtou/).

¹ The exegetical work in this paper has been done with the help of BibleWorks Version 6 computer software, © BibleWorks, LLC, 2003, my version of which includes a digital version of the *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, Third Edition, Copyright © 2000 by The University of Chicago Press. Revised and edited by Frederick William Danker, based on Walter Bauer's *Griechisch-deutsches Wörterbuch zu den Schriften des Neuen Testaments und der frühchristlichen Literatur*, sixth edition, ed. Kurt Aland and Barbara Aland, with Viktor Reichmann and on previous English Editions by W.F.Arndt, F.W.Gingrich, and F.W.Danker.

Further secular uses of this verb include the idea “to look on,” or even, more distinctively, “to investigate” or “to search,” which became the basis for a more profound meaning of “to be concerned about something,” or “to care for something.” For example, *episkeptomai* occurs frequently (about 49 times!) in the book of Numbers, where it means “to count,” or “to number,” probably with the sense of “inspect” and “calculate,” or take a census of the number of people in the land. Another way in which this word is used is to express the idea of “mustering troops” or men of the tribes of Israel. Since Moses or Aaron must often do this counting, or numbering “by hand,” it also conveys a sense of investigating something thoroughly, fully, and with great care. This meaning of *evpiskeptomai* is then expanded elsewhere in the LXX, when it is used of the shepherd in relation to caring for the sheep, as in Jer. 23:2; Zech. 11:16; Ezek. 34:11,12; 2 Chron. 24:6, and other places. Given the rich imagery surrounding this relationship between a shepherd and the sheep, it is not surprising that the verb used for “concern” and “care” in this context would contribute to reflection on the relationship between God and human beings, and later, between the Church and its people. Though not in secular Greek, in the LXX *episkeptomai* has a religious content when God is the subject of the action and it “combines the various senses of ‘to visit, to look upon, to investigate, to inspect, to test, to be concerned about, to care for,’ in description of the act in which the Lord in a special incursion into the course of life of individuals or of a people, mostly Israel, makes known to them His will either in judgment or in grace.”²

Episkeptomai is used most often to translate the Hebrew word דָּקַיִּן, which also has a variety of meanings, including, as a active verb, “to attend to, visit, muster, appoint,” and in passive voice (Niphal) “to be sought (i.e. needed), missed, lacking; of a seat, place (i.e. be empty).” *Episkeptomai* can also have this last sense, as when it is used in 1 Samuel, where David is “missing” from his appointed seat.

Episkeptomai can also be used in the sense of “to appoint, to commission, to install someone” to a post or position of responsibility, as in Ezra 1:2, where it means “charge” or “appoint,” as in “Thus says King Cyrus of Persia: The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem in Judah.” And, in Nehemiah 7:1, the gatekeepers, singers, and Levites have been “appointed.” In Acts 6:3, *evpiskeptomai* is used for “selecting” the seven men who will be deacons, but the word for “appointing” them is, rather, *kaqisthmi*.

In all, *evpiskeptomai* occurs some 181 times in the entire Greek Bible, of which 11 occurrences are in the New Testament. Of these 11 NT occurrences, most often it can be translated into some form of the verb “to visit,” and refers to either person-to-person visits, or to being visited by God. In Acts 6:3, however, it is translated variously as “seek out,” “select,” or “choose” with reference to the seven deacons in the church in Jerusalem. In two other occurrences, Heb. 2:6 and James 1:27, the verb is translated as “to care for,” with God as the verb’s subject in the first case and believers in the second. Thus, the full range of this verb’s usage in the LXX is not necessarily drawn upon in its relatively fewer occurrences in the New Testament. Yet, the range of meanings found in the Septuagint could still have helped shape the word’s use in the New Testament, and so should not be entirely forgotten in our study.

The next cognate word to consult is another verb, *episkopeo* (*evpiskopeo*), appears in Philo and Plato, among other writers, and four times in the LXX and Apocrypha, but only twice in the New Testament (NT). *Episkopeo* has a much narrower range of meanings than *episkeptomai*, since it means, according to the 3rd edition of Baur, Arndt, Gingrich and Danker (BAGD), “to give attention to, look at, take care, see to it.” In both of its NT appearances, it is followed with the negative μή, with the implication of an impending hazard if the matter in question is not looked after carefully. This verb appears with this meaning only once in the NT, in Heb. 12:15. The second time it appears in the NT, in 1 Pet. 5:2, it has fairly weak manuscript attestation and seems to have

² Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Gerhard Kittel, ed., Geoffrey W. Bromiley, trans. and ed. (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1964) Vol. 2, D – H, p.602.

the slightly different meaning of “to accept the responsibility for the care of someone, to oversee, to care for.”

The English word “bishop” comes most directly from the Greek noun *episkopos* (επι, σκοπος), meaning “overseer” or, according to BAGD, “one who has the responsibility of safeguarding or seeing to it that something is done in the correct way, guardian.” It is also from this noun that the English word “Episcopal” is derived. There is clearly a close relationship here between the verb form, *episkopeo*, generally meaning “to care for, to oversee,” and the noun referring to a person who performs this role. This noun appears sixteen times in the LXX and five times within the NT (Acts 20:28; Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:2; Tit. 1:7; and 1 Pet. 2:25), with reference to a range of roles and subjects. In the LXX, as in secular Greek literature, it often refers to “officers of the hosts” or military officers, and then to “those who have oversight of the house of the Lord” as well. It also means “overseers” as of workmen in the fields or on building projects, while in 1 Maccabees 1:51 it is translated as “inspectors” who are appointed over the whole people, but, interestingly, in Job 20:29 it refers to God directly (“This is the portion of the wicked from God, the heritage decreed for them by God,” as the NRSV has it. The second occurrence of “God” in this is a translation of tou/ evpisko, pou). We will look at each of the NT passages in greater detail below.

Another cognate is the noun *episkope* (επισκοπη), whose meaning relates to the performance or office of oversight, so it can mean “the act of watching over with special reference to being present, or visitation,” for example, in referring to God. Alternatively, it can also refer to a “position of responsibility, an assignment, or engagement in oversight, or supervision.” This word appears forty-five times in the LXX and four times in the entire NT (Lk. 19:44; Acts 1:20; 1 Tim. 3:1; and 1 Pet. 2:12), but is very rare in Greek literature outside of the LXX or the NT.

In Genesis *episkoph* is often paired with *episkeptomai* in a sort of formula that is not directly translated, but might mean something like “visit with a visitation.” In Exodus 30:12, it means “registration,” while in Leviticus 19:20 it means “an inquiry” (NRSV) or “due punishment” (NIV). More relevant to this study is the reference in Psalm 109:8, which says, “Let his days be few; and let another take his office” (KJV). (^{BGT} Psalm 108:8 γενηqh, twsan ai` h`me,rai auvtou/ ovli, gai kai. th.n evpiskoph.n auvtou/ la, boi e[teroj.) This text is quoted in Acts 1:20, where Peter talks about the position among the 12 that Judas had held.

In addition to these three directly relevant words, two others appear one time each in some texts of the NT, but they do not add much to the discussion in any case. One of these words, *sunepiskopos* (sunepiskopo, j), which would mean “co-supervisor, co-superintendent” only appears in a very few ancient manuscripts in Philippians 1:1, where it seems to be a mistaken compounding of two separate words: *sun* (sun), meaning “with,” and *episkopoi* (επισκοποι), meaning “bishops.” Most ancient manuscripts and virtually all modern translations have “with the bishops” [NRSV] or “with the overseers” [NIV] or “with their presiding elders” [NJB] here, which assumes two separate words here, rather than a single compound word.³ The Chinese Union Version also translates this as “and all the bishops, all the deacons” (和諸位監督, 諸位執事) .

The second peripheral word is *allotriepiskopos* (avllotriepi, skopo j), found only in 1 Pet. 4:15, which is variously translated as “a busybody in other men’s matters” [KJV]; “a meddler” [NIV]; “an informer” [NJB]; or “a mischief maker” [NRSV]. Although this compound word could arguably refer to trying to be some kind of “overseer in relation to other people,” it clearly is not relevant to our discussion of the etymology and meaning of words related to the concept of the episcopacy. Therefore, it will not be necessary to discuss either this word or the previous word, *sunepiskopos*, which in any event does not even appear in the most reliable Greek manuscripts.

³ This is an interesting, though very minor, example of translation difficulties due to the *scripta continua* method of writing used in the early manuscripts. Since there were no spaces between any words, it could be difficult to determine whether you are dealing with a compound word, or a free-standing preposition.

The Main Cognates in their New Testament Contexts

So, we have to deal with three different words that have a direct etymological bearing on our subject of the episcopacy, and they are *evpiskope,w*, *evpiskopo,j*, and *evpiskoph,,* while at the same time keeping in mind the rich secular Greek and LXX background provided by the verb *evpiske,ptomai*. Altogether, these three words appear eleven times in the NT. As we shall see, they are used with a fairly wide range of meanings, so it will be instructive to look at them in context and briefly discuss their meaning there.

The verb, *evpiskope,w*, is found in two verses in the NT, Heb. 12:15 and 1 Pet. 5:2. The 12th chapter of Hebrews begins with saying that “since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses,” we should respond by living a certain way, as laid out in the rest of the chapter. Believers are to “endure trials for the sake of discipline” (v. 7), and to “lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees” (v. 12). Heb. 12:14-16 then goes as follows [NRSV]:

- ¹⁴ Pursue peace with everyone, and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.
- ¹⁵ See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble, and through it many become defiled.
- ¹⁶ See to it that no one becomes like Esau, an immoral and godless person, who sold his birthright for a single meal.

The first “see to it that no one” in v. 15 is the NRS translation of *evpiskopou/ntej mh,, tij*, which is the present active nominative masculine plural participle of *evpiskope,w* and which might be better translated as “seeing to it lest” these things happen. The “see to it that no one” in verse 16 is not a translation of any verb, but rather a repetition of the verb in English to translate a repeated *mh, tij* in Greek, which often conveniently does not require a repetition of the verb because a second subordinate phrase carries forward the sense of the previous verb. In this context the sense of “giving attention to, taking care, seeing to it that something happens” is with reference to the hearers or readers themselves. They are to see to it that they themselves do not degenerate in their actions so as to fail to obtain God’s grace and so on. It is mutual oversight among the group members themselves of their own conduct and attitudes, framed negatively as a warning of what to avoid.

The second and last appearance of the verb form we are looking at is found in 1 Pet. 5:2, which continues the thought begun in 1 Pet. 5:1. Both those verses, then, are as follows, in the NRSV:

- ¹ Now as an elder myself and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as one who shares in the glory to be revealed, I exhort the elders among you
- ² to tend the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising the oversight, not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it-- not for sordid gain but eagerly.

The participle, *evpiskopou/ntej*, in 5:2, is not present in all ancient manuscripts and is surrounded by brackets in the Nestlé-Aland 27th Edition of the Greek New Testament, indicating that the editors do not feel it was original, but left it there (appropriately marked) because it has appeared in previous editions. Still, the word does make its presence felt in the NRSV translation in the phrase “exercising the oversight.” In this context, clearly it is the oversight of the “elders” or *presbyteroi* (*presbu,teroi*) that is in question, not that of a separate group of leaders with a different title. There is no indication in the Petrine Epistles that a separate group of leaders carried the name of *episkopos* or bishop in the churches to which they were written. On the other hand, the function of general oversight is acknowledged as necessary, but the manner in which it is carried out is also very important: it must not be done from compulsion or for personal gain, but willingly and eagerly. The discussion is framed in terms of a shepherd caring for sheep on behalf of the “chief Shepherd” (1 Pet. 5:4), at whose return the faithful elders will obtain “the unfading crown of glory.”

The two nouns we will investigate appear a total of nine times in the NT. The first one, *evpiskoph*, (“visitation,” “the office of oversight,” or perhaps “episcopacy”), appears four times, the first of which is in Luke 19:44, in the context of Jesus’ lament over Jerusalem and warning about future events, and which reads as follows:

⁴⁴ They will crush you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave within you one stone upon another; because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God.

“Your visitation from God” is a translation of *th/j evpiskoph/j sou*, which is simply translated as “thy visitation” in the KJV, and carries the sense of the divine act of watching over, and being present with, the audience. Such usage, with positive or salutary implications, finds roots in the LXX, in such places as Genesis 50:24f, where Joseph on his deathbed promises that “God will surely come to you (*evpiskoph/ | de. evpiske,yetai u`ma/j o` qeo.j*), and bring you up out of this land to the land that he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob;” and Exodus 3:16, where Moses has gathered the people to hear the promises of God.

This noun next appears in Acts 1:20, where it refers to the “position of oversight” [NRSV], “place of leadership” [NIV], or “bishoprick” [KJV] of Judas Iscariot that Peter is arranging to find someone else to take, and it is in a quotation from LXX Psalm 108:8 (Psalm 109:8 in the MT, where the meaning is slightly different). Here, clearly, is a reference to an “office” or “position” of leadership, a place in the ranks or hierarchy of leaders, a meaning which stands directly behind the usage of the term “episcopacy” in the church today. It seems to be used at this location, however, more because it is found in a pertinent passage of scripture used to interpret an apostolic decision than as an accurate description of the role Judas fulfilled as one of the twelve disciples. This passage would not support a suggestion that the twelve designated disciples of Jesus saw themselves as “bishops” or *evpiskopoi*, in any later sense of the word; that would be anachronistic in the extreme.

Just such a meaning does begin to surface, however, in the next appearance of the noun *evpiskoph*, in 1 Tim. 3:1, where the NRSV has “The saying is sure: whoever aspires to the office of bishop desires a noble task.” Alternative translations, however, leave room for a less specific understanding: “Here is something that you can rely on: to want to be a presiding elder is to desire a noble task” [NJB]; or “Here is a trustworthy saying: If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task” [NIV]. Apparently, though, the author of 1 Timothy is referring to an office or a position in the church that was well accepted and understood by the recipients of the letter. Since there is no explanation of the word in the text, it is reasonable to presume that it did not need to be explained because everyone at that time was already clear as to what the office of “*evpiskoph*,” entailed. However, we cannot be sure if this position of leadership in the early church resembles that of bishop in any church today.

The final appearance of this noun in the NT is in 1 Pet. 2:12, where it again refers to God’s “day of visitation” [KJV]. Unlike the sense in Luke 19:44, this time the word seems to imply a more threatening and negative image, despite that fact that the NRSV simply translates the word as “when he (God) comes to judge.”

Of the four appearances of the noun *evpiskoph*, in the NT, then, only in 1 Timothy does it refer unambiguously to an office or post in the leadership of the church. Two times the word refers to divine visitation, once in a positive tone and once in a more negative one, while the other occurrence refers to the place Judas Iscariot had among the disciples and thus relates to keeping the number of apostles at 12, with all the symbolic meaning that number carried for the Jews. The single clear reference to a position of leadership in the church comes from one of the Pastoral Epistles, whose authorship and dating is much disputed among scholars. It is, along with other things, this use of *evpiskoph*, (and of *evpiskopo,j*) in the Pastorals that prompts many scholars to assign to them a late date and pseudonymous authorship based on the argument that such

a clearly delineated “office” of Bishop is not hinted at in the undisputed writings of Paul, or indeed in the rest of the New Testament.

The second noun, *evpiskopo, j*, is found five times in the NT (Acts 20:28; Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:2; Tit. 1:7; and 1 Pet. 2:25). The first instance is in Acts 20:28, where Luke has Paul speaking to the assembled elders, or *presbu, teroi* (*presbyteroi*), of Ephesus, bidding them farewell. He calls on them to “Keep watch over yourselves and over all the flock, of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers (*evpisko, pouj*), to shepherd the church of God that he obtained with the blood of his own Son.” Here, the only time this word appears in the Gospels or Acts, overseers are identified with the elders, without any distinction implied between them, so that use of the term “overseers” seems merely to describe an aspect of the role and function of the elders in the churches in and around Ephesus. Since the Holy Spirit has made the elders “overseers,” however, it is clearly a highly valued aspect of the role and function of an elder also to be an “overseer.”

The next appearance of *evpiskopo, j* is in Philippians 1:1, which Paul addresses to “all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons...” [NRSV]. As this is the only time any of the relevant words appear in the Pauline Epistles that are generally agreed to be authentic, this verse carries perhaps an inordinate weight. It could be used to support an argument that Paul knew of “bishops;” that it was an identifiable, accepted office in Paul’s time, and that Paul himself even established bishops as leaders in the churches he founded. However, such an argument is difficult to sustain based only upon Phil. 1:1, since “bishops” and “deacons” are both in the plural and seemingly stand as equals in relation to “all the saints.” According to the TDNT, as Paul’s words in Phil. 1:1 stand, “they refer to those whose responsibility is that of *evpiskopei/n* and *diakonei/n*, though we cannot deduce the exact nature of these tasks from this passage.”⁴ Throughout the rest of the Epistle to the Philippians, and, indeed, of all of Paul’s undisputed letters, we find virtually no mention of the function, authority, or roles of these “bishops and deacons.”⁵

The next two appearances of *evpiskopo, j* are from the Pastoral Epistles, from 1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:7, and they both list qualifications and requirements for persons who will fill what can be described as at least the rudiments of a true “office” of a bishop. The expectations highlight reliability, stability, the ability to teach and be an example to others. The descriptions of what is required of a bishop in terms of moral and personal qualifications read much like the “*Haustafeln*,” the household rules that appear in various places in the New Testament and that are reflections of the ideal social morality of the time in the Roman Empire.

1 Timothy 3:1 – 2 contain both *evpiskoph,* and *evpiskopo, j*, and in the NRSV are translated as follows:

¹ The saying is sure: whoever aspires to the office of bishop desires a noble task. ² Now a bishop must be above reproach, married only once, temperate, sensible, respectable, hospitable, an apt teacher.

So, there appears already to have been an “office” to which to aspire by the time 1 Timothy was written. But beyond that simple fact, the text of the NT does not provide any more content, and certainly no details as to how a person would fulfill such an aspiration, or exactly what the position entailed at that time. There are no grounds for supposing that this text implies an “apostolic succession” whereby a bishop was appointed by the previous bishop, as there could be many ways in which one would seek to bring such an aspiration to fruition.

Interestingly, in the context of Titus 1:5–9, “bishop” and “elder,” or *presbutero, j* (*presbyteros*), seem to refer to the same office, both having the same qualifications. Titus 1:5–7 is translated in the NRSV as follows:

⁴ TDNT, Vol. 2, p.616.

⁵ See, for example, David L. Bartlett, *Ministry in the New Testament* (Augsburg Fortress: Minneapolis, 1993), p.43.

⁵ I left you behind in Crete for this reason, so that you should put in order what remained to be done, and should appoint elders in every town, as I directed you: ⁶ someone who is blameless, married only once, whose children are believers, not accused of debauchery and not rebellious. ⁷ For a bishop, as God's steward, must be blameless; he must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or addicted to wine or violent or greedy for gain;

The reason Paul has left Titus in Crete is so that he should put things in order and appoint *elders* in every town, as he had been directed to do (Titus 1:5). These elders are to be “blameless, married only once, whose children are believers, not accused of debauchery and not rebellious” (1:6), and then the verse immediately following has a post-positive *gar* construction in the sentence (dei/ ga.r to.n evpi,skopon avne,gklhton ei=nai w`j qeou/ oivkono,mon) that is usually translated “For a Bishop must be blameless, as a steward of God...” This synonymous relationship between “elder” and “bishop,” and the implication that each is a “steward of God,” is well worth keeping in mind as we attempt to analyze and interpret the evidence for the episcopacy in the New Testament itself. That Paul is said to have “directed” Titus to appoint “elders” in every town may also be relevant to our subject.

Finally, however, we must briefly mention the last appearance of *evpiskopo, j* in the New Testament, which is at 1 Peter 2:25, and where the word clearly refers to Jesus Christ, who is the “shepherd and guardian (*evpiskopo, j*) of your souls” (NRSV) (to.n poime,na kai. evpi,skopon tw/n yucw/n u`mw/n).

Some Preliminary Conclusions

Thus, of the five appearances of *evpiskopo, j* in the NT, one clearly refers to Jesus Christ, not to any other human leader in the church, while three others refer to leadership roles in the church that are synonymous either with elders or deacons. Only in one instance, in 1 Timothy 3:2, does *evpiskopo, j* seem unambiguously to refer to a unique role or office in the church. The qualities of a person seeking this office are listed, but no description of the office itself, its duties or responsibilities, or how an office seeker might be chosen, is offered in this text.

To sum up our tour through the landscape of words related directly to episcopacy, it seems that there is scant evidence of a firmly entrenched office of bishop, with well understood means of succession during the New Testament period itself. Of the eleven appearances of *episkopeo*, *episcopo*, and *episkopos* only a few relate to what can be identified as an “officer” or an “office” in the church, and in several of those the words are synonymous with another office, such as “elder” or “deacon.” The evidence does indicate the beginnings of an established “episcopacy” by the time of the Pastoral Epistles, but the shape of such an institution is not given any definition in the text.

The way in which one would have become a bishop is also neither clear nor standardized. In Acts 20:28, Luke has Paul saying that the Holy Spirit has appointed the elders at Ephesus as overseers or “bishops,” while in Titus 1, Paul himself (or, more likely, a later follower of Paul) asserts that Titus has been “directed” to appoint elders (not bishops, however) in every town. Was leadership in the church seen as stemming from appointment by the Holy Spirit, by predecessors in the office, or by action of the church body itself?

Given this sparse information, then, it can be quite firmly stated that the New Testament itself does not provide any attestation of a highly developed Episcopal institution with any kind of clear mechanism for choosing who is to be bishop, much less for any pattern of arranging for a “succession” of bishops. Within the NT itself, with the possible single exception of 1 Timothy 3:2, there seems to be no differentiation whatsoever between the offices of “bishop,” “elder,” or “deacon,” and no basis for giving privilege or priority to the position of bishop over that of elder or even deacon. The idea of an “apostolic succession” does not find support within the NT itself, except only for the statement in Titus 1:5 that Paul had “directed” Titus to “appoint elders” in every town in Crete, and this is scant support indeed. Whether an early or a later date is ascribed to the Pastorals, Titus 1:5 does not constitute a specific Episcopal imperative, though it could support an argument that the church needs an ordered structure in which continuity is important.

It was in the subsequent tumultuous history of the early church that the doctrine of “apostolic succession,” or the “historic episcopate,” was born in response to threats from the many different kinds of Christianity which were labeled “heresies” by those who sought to defend the standard, mainstream, or “orthodox” position. The role and position of the bishop needed reinforcing as a way of defending the church and its doctrines against theological assault from outside and from inside. The letter known as “1 Clement,” for example, was written from the church in Rome to that in Corinth to admonish the latter church members for having deposed their leaders, who were called “presbyters,” not “bishops,” from their positions. Written perhaps in 95 C.E., this letter quite understandably emphasizes the importance of bishops and elders and the necessity of obedience to them. It argues that the Apostles had foreseen strife over the name of bishop and had appointed successors and a system of arranging for Episcopal succession that required the consent of the whole church.⁶ As the theological and ecclesiological struggles of the second century intensified, “orthodox” theologians seized upon this idea of an unbroken succession of Episcopal leadership back to the Apostles as a way of buttressing their argument against the “heretics.” This “apostolic succession” was one of the important weapons in the arsenal of “orthodoxy” used against the “heretics,” whose ideas were depicted as new, idiosyncratic, and lacking historical depth, which was taken in turn as proof of heterodox unreliability. The idea worked as a legitimating tool for churches. If a group of people wanting to call themselves a “church” did not have a bishop who could trace his roots back through a succession of bishops to the very Apostles themselves, then they were not a legitimate church. So, “church” became linked with “bishop” in such a way that having a bishop was itself constitutive of church: if there was no bishop, then there was no church.

Though it is currently fashionable for scholars to castigate the theologians of the early church for their “biased” treatment of heresy, such historical revisionism is unseemly and out of place. We should not expect the thinkers and church leaders of the second century to share the same allegedly pluralistic, tolerant world-view as many in the twenty-first century, and it is disingenuous in the extreme to fault them for their response to what they perceived to be a mortal threat. Thus, it is important to value the idea of “apostolic succession” for the role it has played in the history of the church. Similarly, the emergence of the episcopacy as an institution that was of vital importance for the survival of the church must be acknowledged in any discussion of the subject today. Bishops moved into a privileged position over elders and deacons for valid, vital historical reasons.

Yet, this does not mean that we must necessarily accept this doctrine or this view of the episcopacy for the church today, faced as it is with different challenges and opportunities. This is especially true given that the New Testament itself does not suggest the idea of apostolic succession, nor does it indicate that bishops should be more important in the church than presbyters or deacons. The New Testament provides, in fact, just as solid a basis for leadership roles of presbyters and deacons in the structure of the church as it does for bishops. Scripture also provides further resources for building good leadership and structure in a church.

Looking Beyond the Cognate Words for Other Biblical Resources

To access these resources, however, we must leave behind a close description of words and their meanings to move into a broader category of Bible passages and their implications for us today. In other words, the Bible can be a resource not only in terms of vocabulary (though that can be important at times as well), but even more in terms of concepts, images, and ideas. Important tools for understanding the episcopacy and the role of a bishop in the church can be found beyond just the related word groups.

The first of these resources can be found in a word we have already discussed: *episkeptomai* (evpiskeptomai). Its range of meaning from “visit” to “looking carefully at” something, to

⁶ See 1 Clement 44:1 – 3, where “bishops” are mentioned in general, while the specific leaders of the Corinthian church are called “presbyters.” There is also no mention in 1 Clement of a bishop of Rome, from where the letter originated. The text of this and other early Christian writings is available on-line at www.earlychristianwritings.com.

“caring for,” could all be employed in envisioning the role of a bishop in the church. If a “bishop” is an overseer, biblically speaking, similar to an “elder,” charged with responsibility to keep order and propriety in the church, then “visiting” and “caring” are very appropriate and useful words for understanding the role of a bishop modeled on God’s own care for and oversight of the church. Such an understanding could fit with any form of church structure, whether democratic or more hierarchical, but would be especially appropriate for one that sees a bishop as a shepherd of other shepherds, a pastor for other pastors.

Once such an understanding is operative in the church, the Bible opens up with a rich assortment of images that can provide fruitful resources for understanding the episcopacy and the role of a bishop; too many to deal with in detail here. Now Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd, with his faithful obedience, his love and care for the weak, the sick, and the lost, becomes a role-model, a pattern, for a bishop, or for an elder or any leader in the church, which can be understood as the gathering of Jesus’ followers in His name.

Given the amazing history of the church in China in the last several decades as only one relevant example, it hardly seems necessary to note that a definition of church that requires the presence of a bishop would do violence to the clear evidence. By various means, and through the dedication of many lay leaders and relatively few pastors, the church in China has grown and developed while in some ways seeming to invent its own structure and organization as it went along. As the church has grown dramatically and faced numerous challenges with surprising success in many cases, it would be extremely difficult to argue persuasively that the churches all around China are only “legitimate” if they are constituted with a bishop at their head who stands within a specific definition of “apostolic succession,” or “the historic episcopacy.” Jesus’ reminder in Matthew 18:20 that “where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” seems much more relevant to that situation than an emphasis on Episcopal structure that arose out of a very different historical context, no matter how else the situation of the church in China today may be reminiscent of that of the early church.

The church, this gathering where Jesus has promised to be present, does need structure and order, and here the Apostle Paul’s words about the importance of order and decorum in the church are worth careful consideration as well. But the form in which this need for structure is given expression can surely be quite plural in a church that finds its roots in the ethos of the New Testament, so that different models of church organization can all be recognized and celebrated without the need for imposing severe uniformity. The New Testament has a great deal to say to the church, the Body of Christ, about how it should act in and relate to the world, but it does not say much at all about precisely how the church should organize itself, leaving ample room for differences. Whether a church calls its leaders bishops, presidents, elders, or anything else, and no matter how it organizes itself, it seems that in order to be faithful to the New Testament it must seek to model its leadership after Jesus’ words in Matthew 20:26b – 29, “whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.” These words say nothing specifically about bishops, but they are central to an understanding of church leadership, including that of bishops, that is grounded in the scriptures and seeks to find shape and direction from them.

It is my hope that this journey into the Bible has done at least two things: first, to provide at least some basis for discussion of the episcopacy in light of the New Testament, and second, to model a way in which the resources of the New Testament can be brought to bear on current issues that goes beyond just looking at specific words that are related directly to the issue at hand. While the words and their meanings are important, Christians should always remember that Christ is the center, the fulcrum, the hermeneutical principle of the scriptures, and this rich resource should be brought into any biblical discussion on any subject of concern to the church today. This is especially true of a topic as important to the future of the church as how it is going to structure itself and constitute its leadership.