Finding the Historical Church: A Pursuit in Futility

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Abstract

Many Protestants today have been disenchanted with Protestantism due to the great degree of

denominationalism which is rife within the tradition. This disenchantment has led some

Protestants to explore the Catholic and Orthodox churches, because of their apparent historicity.

Within modern Christianity, a claim to be the historical church can be a powerful apologetic for

several denominations. However, because of the influence of various factors, political and

otherwise, no modern church can accurately claim to be the historical church. Consequently,

Christians ought to look to Scripture as the sole authoritative source of doctrine and use church

structures similar to the presbyterian polity.

Finding The Historical Church: A Pursuit in Futility

To outsiders, the sectarian web of modern Christianity may seem suffocating. In the

Vatican, councils upon councils act as if though they have equal authority to the words of Christ

and his apostles. In the East, the Church is bound to national identity. Within Protestantism, each

individual decides what Christianity means to him, creating a smorgasbord of denominations.

Therefore, the question which ought to be on the minds of Christians across denominations is:

Which one has it right?

The apparent historicity of Catholicism and Orthodoxy seems to suggest that either of

these churches must have it right. Additionally, the rise of subjectivism and blurring moral

boundaries within American Protestantism have further advocated for Catholicism and

Orthodoxy. Due to the individualistic nature of Protestantism, many factions, denominations, and

splinter groups have arisen, further confusing the average Christian. The organizational

simplicity and traditional appeal of older, episcopal churches may attract disenchanted

evangelicals. While these traditional sects may have historical continuity, their practices are

often unbiblical. Therefore, the historical claims of the Catholic and Orthodox churches act as a

stumbling block towards many believers today, especially younger Christians.

Statement of Problem

Throughout the history of Protestantism, Christians have become divided over small,

sometimes trivial issues. While *sola scriptura* has its theological merits, this doctrine, along with

the unprecedented private availability of the Bible, has led to the rise of many distinct

interpretations of scripture and conclusions on Christian doctrines. Therefore, the traditional,

uniform, and organized nature of pre-reformation Christian sects has led some Christians to

abandon Protestantism in favor of Catholicism and Orthodoxy. Since their inception, the

Catholic and Orthodox Churches have claimed that their churches possess apostolic succession

to justify their legitimacy. In order to support these claims, episcopal churches[1] must ensure that

their current episcopal structures can legitimately be traced back to the apostles, and they must

also show that the institutional church should be controlled by bishops, even if their apostolic

succession is legitimate. On the other hand, Protestant churches must show a historical warrant

for their form of church government and a theological warrant for having a distinct and separate

communion from more historically rooted churches. Moreover, in defense of their hegemony,

episcopal churches have argued that bishops and priests of the church possess unique sacerdotal

power. According to this position, because there is only one institutional church that can

administer sacraments through this sacerdotal power, only the correct church is the custodian of

salvation. This position can further be used to argue that the traditions of the church are the

supreme authority in determining doctrine, instead of scripture.

Paul clearly suggests in 1 Corinthians 1 that there ought not be any divisions within the

Church. The application of passages such as 1 Corinthians 1 is hotly debated. Does this mean

that there can only be one institutional church which is the image of the true spiritual church? Or

do passages such as 1 Corinthians 1 refer to avoiding meaningless divisions which do more harm

than good? Perhaps, these passages should be interpreted in completely different ways. However,

interpretations of various related passages must be taken in stride with historical evidence

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[1] For the sake of this thesis, the term *Episcopal* will be used to label non-Protestant churches which use an episcopal structure, including the Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox, and Assyrian churches.

regarding the development of the church in order to come to a conclusion on how protestant

Christians should respond to episcopal claims.

Thesis

Despite claiming apostolic succession, no episcopal church accurately represents the

universal institutional church. Instead, political forces throughout the first few centuries A.D.

morphed early church institutions into unbiblical and nontraditional forms. Particularly,

influences from the persecution and the Roman government streamlined the institutions of the

church, especially within Rome and her vassals. Given the lack of a preserved institutional

church, scripture ought to be followed as closely as possible, without unnecessarily doing away

with traditions.

Therefore, this thesis will address the validity of episcopal churches in relation to the

concept of a single historical church. First, historical factors will be addressed, including the

Church of the East's distinct development, the evolution of the episcopal structure and the

papacy, and the intended jurisdiction of the ecumenical councils. Additionally, church polity and

sola scriptura will be addressed from a theological perspective. Finally, the biblical evidence

will be weighed.

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Episcopal Claims

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Apostolic Succession

The crux of the historical claims of the episcopal churches is their claim to apostolic

succession—that all bishops can trace the lineage of their ordination to the apostles. This claim is

not without some level of Biblical merit. Jesus tells the apostles, while commanding them on

church discipline, that "whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you

loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Matt. 18:18).[2] If this command is exclusive to the

apostles, it makes some degree of sense to claim that only the apostles and whomever they

appoint have this necessary ability. Early Christian sources, including Clement of Rome in 1

Clement, support this claim:

> The Apostles received for us the gospel from our Lord Jesus Christ; our Lord Jesus Christ
> received it from God. 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. …
> Preaching, therefore, through the countries and cities, they appointed their firstfruits to be
> bishops and deacons over such as should believe, after they had proved them in the Spirit.
> 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.[3]

Of course, episcopal churches use citations from the church fathers, such as 1 Clement, to

support the need for apostolic succession. Clement of Rome, at the very least, makes it

abundantly clear that the church around 100 A.D. considered apostolic succession a critical

aspect of the church. While Clement stops short of saying that an episcopal understanding of

apostolic succession or a three-tiered episcopal hierarchy is necessary for the church, the seeds of

those doctrines are present in his epistle.

Over the course of church history, the emphasis on apostolic succession within the

episcopal churches has only been confirmed and extended. By the 13th century, the Catholic

church taught that "[spiritual] power [was] perpetuated as it is necessary to build up the

Church.…Therefore, the spiritual power was given to the disciples of Christ so as to pass on

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[2] Unless otherwise stated, all biblical references are in the English Standard Version.

[3] Charles H. Hoole, trans., Chapter 42 in *1 Clement* (1885),
https://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/1clement-hoole.html.

from them to others."[4] The Catholic Church, therefore, teaches that the spiritual ability given to

the apostles by Christ, as referenced in Matthew 18 and elsewhere, must be directly given to the

successors of the apostles, the bishops. On the one hand, the Catholic Church currently teaches

that, largely for these reasons, only the clergy can administer the sacraments under normal

circumstances.[5] Likewise, the Eastern Orthodox Church currently places a premium on apostolic

succession, because of the emphasis Orthodoxy puts on episcopacy. Within Orthodoxy, bishops,

who are considered the successors of the apostles, are called "the instruments of the Holy Spirit"

and "the fountain of all the sacraments… through which salvation is imparted."[6] Therefore,

because bishops are considered, to some extent, the means by which grace is administered within

the Eastern Orthodox Church, apostolic succession is considered necessary for the church to

continue being the church.

Ecumenical Councils

While the Catholic and Orthodox churches largely have agreement on the importance of

apostolic succession, there is a greater degree of disagreement on ecumenical councils. On the

one hand, the Catholic Church teaches that "there never is an ecumenical council which is not

confirmed or at least recognized as such by Peter's successor," which is to say the pope.[7] On the

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[4] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, ed. and trans. Charles J. O'Neil (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975).

[5] Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2000), 1142.

[6] David Heithe-Stade, "Eastern Orthodox Ecclesiologies in the Era of Confessionalism," *Theoforum* 41, no. 3 (2010): 380. https://www.academia.edu/1125117/Eastern_Orthodox_Ecclesiologies_in_the_Era_of_Confessionalism.

[7] *Catechism*, 884.

other hand, the Orthodox Church teaches that the college of bishops assembled in an ecumenical council has authority over all bishops, including the pope. The Orthodox will often cite the canons of the third council of Constantinople (680-681) as evidence: "And with these we define that there shall be expelled from the holy Church of God and anathematized Honorius who was some time Pope of Old Rome, because of what we found written by him to Sergius, that in all respects he followed his view and confirmed his impious doctrines."[8] Even though this canon did not depose a pope, Constantinople III nevertheless provides an instance of the college of bishops exercising authority over the papacy in an ecumenical council. The Orthodox Church goes so far as to say "that a teaching can only be defined if it is held to be revealed at all times, everywhere, and by all believers," following after "the rule of St. Vincent of Lerin (d. 450)," regardless of any doctrine that a pope or episcopal council suggests.[9] That being said, the episcopal churches generally agree with the Catholic claim that "the college of bishops exercises power over the universal Church in a solemn manner in an ecumenical council."[10]

Papacy

Finally, the Catholic view of the papacy must be briefly considered. The Catholic Church believes that: "the college or body of bishops has no authority unless it is understood together with the Roman Pontiff, the successor of Peter as its head.… In virtue of his office, that is as

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[8] Constantinople III. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, vol. 14, trans by. Henry Percival, ed. by Philip Schaff and Henry Wice (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1900), Session XII. Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight. https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3813.htm.

[9] August Hasler, *How the Pope Became Infallible: Pius IX and the Politics of Persuasion* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday), 153. https://archive.org/details/howpopebecameinf0000hasl/page/152/mode/2up.

[10] *Catechism*, 884.

Vicar of Christ and pastor of the whole Church, the Roman Pontiff has full, supreme and

universal power over the Church."[11] Effectively, the Catholic Church believes that the pope, as

the successor of Peter, who is the rock upon whom Christ has built his church, is the chief

representative of Christ in the church. Therefore, the pope has the right to exercise authority over

the whole church and the college of bishops.

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Historical Factors

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Distinct Development of the Church of the East

In order to demonstrate that political factors played the largest roles in the development

of the great church's status as the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church, the early history of

the church outside of the Roman Empire must be analyzed. However, most of the modern church

descends from the church within Rome and her vassals. The most glaring exception to this rule is

the Church of the East, which developed in the Sassanid Empire and was largely independent

from the Roman church. Therefore, examination of the Church of the East's development can

shed some light on the role of political factors in the development of the church in the Roman

Empire.

Historical Backgrounds

Before A.D. 280, the Persian church was a loose collection of various congregations,

which looked westward to the See of Arbela for guidance.[12] However, in A.D. 280, due to the

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[11] Second Vatican Council, "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium*," sec. 3. https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/index.htm.

[12] Sr. Roselin, MTS, "The Historical Evolution of the Patriarchate in the Church of the East Over Its First Four National Synods," *Asian Horizons*, 8 no. 1 (2014): 99.

growth of the Persian church, Papa bar Agai became the first bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, the

capital of the Sassanid Empire. His successors would eventually be known as the catholicoi[13] of

the Persian church. This shift allowed for the Persian church to cease relying on external help for

guidance.[14] While a council had been held in A.D. 315 in Seleucia to organize the church in the

Sassanid empire, the Persian church was not well-organized until the fifth century due to

constant persecution. However, in A.D. 401, Shah Yazdegerd I, the ruler of the Sassanid Empire,

passed an edict of toleration which allowed Christians to legally practice their religion.

Following the edict of toleration, the Synod of Mar Isaac was held by 40 bishops across Persia in

A.D. 410 in order to address a letter from the Roman church.[15]

The Synod of Mar Isaac and Its Implications

This letter from the Roman church, brought to the council by Mar Marutha of

Maypherqat,[16] contained three requests to the Persian church: First, the Persians were asked to

adopt a more strict monoepiscopacy, where there would never be two bishops in one city.

Second, they were asked to adhere to the same major holidays as the rest of the church, namely

Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, and Easter week. Finally, they were asked to affirm the canons of

Nicaea.[17] These requests were not made with threats of excommunication by the Roman church;

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[13] *Catholicos* is the term the Church of the East uses to refer to their patriarch.

[14] Roselin, "Historical Evolution," 99-100.

[15] Roselin, "Historical Evolution," 108-109.

[16] Maypherqat is a city in modern-day eastern Turkey. While still a part of the Roman church, its connections to Syrian Christianity led to Mar Marutha being well-respected by the Persian church.; Roselin, "Historical Evolution," 108.

[17] The Synod of Mar `Ishaq. *The Synod of Mar `Ishaq 410*, ed. and trans. by M.J. Birnie (unpublished), 3. https://www.fourthcentury.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/06/thecouncilofmarishaq.pdf.

rather, the Persian bishops were by no means forced to agree to these requests, and each bishop

was freely able to reject them.[18] However, after these requests and the canons of Nicaea were

read allowed at the synod, Mar Isaac, the catholicos of the Persian church, declared that any of

the bishops who did not agree to these requests would be anathematized.[19] The lack of any sort

of binding force on the requests of this letter and the ability of Mar Isaac to determine the extent

to which the requests of this letter would be enforced suggests that the Roman church did not

view Nicaea I as inherently binding on the Persian church. Moreover, these factors also suggest

that the Roman church, during the fifth century, did not view itself as superior to the Persian

church, but viewed the Persian church as separate and independent.

Furthermore, the Synod of Mar Isaac was only called after Mar Marutha translated the

letter into Persian and presented it to Shah Yazdegerd with Mar Isaac for approval.[20] Yazdegerd

approved the letter and called the synod, inviting 40 bishops from across the east, both in Persia

and India, in order that there might be no schism within the church in his empire.[21] Likewise,

emperor Constantine called Nicaea I in part that there might be concord within the church of the

Roman Empire.[22] While Yazdegerd was a Zoroastrian and, therefore, most likely did not desire

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[18] Mar `Ishaq, 2.

[19] Ibid., 4.

[20] Mar `Ishaq, 2.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Everett Ferguson, *From Christ to the Pre-Reformation : The Rise and Growth of the Church in Its Cultural, Intellectual, and Political Context, vol. 1, Church History* (Nashville, TN: HarperCollins Christian Publishing, 2009), 184. ProQuest.

to appease the Christian God like Constantine wished to do,[23] it remains possible that Yazdegerd

aided the Christians so that there could be greater peace and concord in the Sassanid Empire.

Later Synods of the Fourth Century

Throughout the rest of the fourth century, the Church of the East continued to have

synods to discuss theological and ecclesiological matters. Notably, the next synod held by the

Church of the East, the Synod of Mar Yabalaha in 420, addressed the relationship between the

Roman church and the Persian church. The synod established "the two Empires as 'the powerful

shoulders of the world.'"[24] At this time, the Persian church "[hoped] to establish 'Peace and

Harmony' with the Church in the Roman Empire."[25] Therefore, the church in Persia during the

fifth century viewed itself as distinct from the church in Rome, but by no means independent or

inferior. Moreover, this synod shows that the Persian church did not view the Roman emperor as

important for the whole church, but only the church in Rome.

Four years later, the Synod of Mar Dadisho would be called by King Bahram in light of a

coup in the church: the catholicos, Mar Dadisho, had been thrown into a prison, and a false

catholicos had taken his place.[26] Because Mar Dadisho had been arrested on accusations of being

pro-Roman, the Synod of Mar Dadisho decided that the Church of the East would no longer look

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[23] Ibid., 184-185.

[24] Ephrem A. Ishac, "COGD 5.2: List of the Councils of the East Syriac Church (March 2021)," Research Infrastructure on Religious Studies, March 24, 2021, https://reires.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Ishac_Handouts_ReiRes_COGD-5.2_East-Syriac-Synods-with-general-content_22-March-2021_Final-1.pdf.

[25] Ishac, "Councils".

[26] Roselin, "Historical Evolution," 116.

to the west for guidance to avoid accusations of treason against the Sassanid Empire.[27] This

distinguishes the catholicos of the east from the western patriarchs which would found the

Orthodox church—Alexandria, Jerusalem, Antioch, and Constaninople. Unlike these patriarchs,

which continued to look to Rome for guidance through the early medieval period for political

and pragmatic reasons, the catholicos of Seleucia-Ctesiphon did not look to any patriarch or

bishop for guidance after the fifth century. Their independence allowed for the Church of the

East to be an autonomous church in communion with the Roman church until the miaphysite

schism in 451.[28]

Evolution of the Episcopal Structure

Key to the episcopal churches' claims to historicity is the validity of their ecclesiology,

especially their episcopal structure. Within all episcopal churches today, one bishop exists in

each city, never more and never less. However, this was not always the case. "Originally, the

bishop headed a single community—like the parish priest today—and such communities were

quite small."[29] This led to a system similar to the modern presbyterian system, where there

would be multiple bishops, per se, in each city who represented each congregation and had equal

power as each other. However, a monoepiscopal structure became the norm within Christendom

by the fifth century.[30]

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[27] Ibid., 117.

[28] Ibid., 118.

[29] John Meyendorff, *Imperial Unity and Christian Division: The Church 450-680 A.D.*, vol. 2, *The Church in History* (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1989), 42.

[30] Ibid., 41.

Development of a Monoepiscopal System

The first church father to support a monoepiscopal system was Ignatius in the early second century A.D.[31] At the time of his writing, the docetists were inciting division in the church. Therefore, Ignatius argued that each congregation should have its own bishop, with several presbyters assisting him in leading the congregation.[32] Notably, Ignatius did not argue that the bishop should have absolute authority over the presbyters below them, but that the bishop should be "the first among equals"[33] Moreover, there is no evidence to suggest that Ignatius envisioned episcopal authority being grounded in apostolic succession.[34] Later in the second century, Iranaeus cites apostolic succession as an apologetic for episcopal authority.[35] Additionally, by the turn of the third century, most congregations possessed a bishop in the way Ignatius outlined.[36] However, the common church structure of the late second century and early third century still allowed for multiple bishops in each city. Writing in the late fourth century, Jerome affirms Ignatius's defense of the monoepiscopal system, but expresses that this system was customary and not given by divine institution.[37]

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[31] Ferguson, *From Christ*, 55-56.

[32] Ibid., 56.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Ferguson, *From Christ*, 107.

[36] Ibid., 106.

[37] Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 2, *Ante-Nicene Christianity. A.D. 100-325* (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library), 133. Christian Classics Ethereal Library.

While there was a lack of unity in the shift from a pseudo-presbyterian system to a monoepiscopal system, throughout the second and third centuries, external pressure from persecution and internal pressure from heresies led congregations across the church to adopt episcopal systems independently.[38] However, during the fourth century, political forces led to the elevation of some bishops over others.[39] Bishops from the country, often called chorbishops, were seen as insignificant to the extent that the canons presented to the Persian church at the Synod of Mar Isaac included a prohibition on multiple chorbishops per city bishop.[40] By the time of Nicaea, metropolitans, bishops from larger cities, had more authority than bishops from smaller cities, and the patriarchal system began to develop.[41] This development seemed to have mostly been through a sort of convergent evolution, where uniform external and internal pressure existed across most of Christianity, leading to a somewhat standard system early on in the church. By all accounts, the episcopal structure which developed in the first few centuries A.D. was not even claimed to be instituted by Christ by the early church and existed mostly for practical reasons, not theological ones. Therefore, the claims of episcopal churches regarding the importance of apostolic succession, especially as it relates to the early church, are anachronistic.

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[38] Ibid., 135.

[39] Ibid., 146.

[40] The Synod of Mar `Ishaq, 8.

[41] Schaf, *History*, 146.

Political and Imperial Influence

Although the initial shift towards a monoepiscopal system was largely due to the choices

of individual churches in response to various pressures, the further development of the episcopal

system was highly influenced by political factors. The intermingling of church and state rapidly

intensified when Constantine called the council of Nicaea in 325 A.D. in order to promote unity

in his empire.[42] Moreover, Constantine's retention of the pagan title *pontifex maximus*, or high

priest, when he began to involve himself in Christian affairs suggests that he viewed himself as

an important figure to the function of the church.[43] Additionally, these titles Constantine gave

himself were also substantiated by Christian theologians. "In terms of *Christian* theology, the

imperium was understood as a particular personal chiasm bestowed directly be God; one which,

according to the same Eusebius, granted to the emperor 'episcopal' functions 'over those outside,'

i.e. essentially responsibility of administering and, eventually [sic], Christianizing the pagans in

his ideally universal Empire, and the whole world."[44] Of course, this understanding of the

emperor's role in the church was very helpful for maintaining the same goals of leadership which

led the church to adopt a monoepiscopal structure in the first place. However, strong imperial

involvement led to a level of corruption and imperial meddling in the Roman church which the

Church of the East lacked. While the kings of the Sassanid Empire were typically Zoroastrian

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[42] Ferguson, *From Christ*, 193.;
Although there had been some interaction with the Roman government and the Roman church before Nicaea, beginning with the edict of toleration in 313 A.D., previous interactions were more informal and less sweeping.

[43] Ferguson, *From Christ*, 185.;
To further this point, Constantine's son, Constantius called himself the "bishop of bishops."

[44] Meyendorff, *Imperial Unity*, 33.

and, therefore, did not desire to have deep involvement with the affairs of the church, the Roman

emperors after Constantine were often Christians. Therefore, the government and the church in

the Roman Empire eventually became so intertwined that, in the sixth century, Justinian

"required that all pagans receive baptism, under the penalty of confiscation of property and

exile."[45]

Many church fathers spoke out against imperial meddling, however, including

Athanasius, John Chrysostom, and Maximus the Confessor. They claimed that "emperors should

not interfere with the affairs of episcopal synods, and claimed the superiority of the sacerdotal

functions over the imperial."[46] These men's beliefs had great historical warrant. Even though it

was the emperors' main goal to maintain unity with the church and empire, successive councils

forced the emperor and the church to choose between various factions and divide on the details.[47]

Moreover, the immense political power given to bishops led to rampant corruption. Bishops of

major cities could even expect to be paid salaries comparable to provincial governors.

Consequently, these types of financial conditions, where some bishops were very wealthy, led to

bribes and simony.[48] This level of corruption and political involvement in church proves an

originally unexpected consequence of the monoepiscopal system. While the original intent of the

system was to help promote unity and leadership, because the monoepiscopal system put most

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[45] Meyendorff, *Imperial Unity*, 15.

[46] Ibid., 26.

[47] Ibid., 34.

[48] Ibid., 49.

power in the hands of very few men, schism and bribery became commonplace in the Roman

church.

Papacy

The papacy began to develop under similar political circumstances as the rise of

metropolitan bishops and patriarchs: Due to Rome's importance as the capital city of the Empire

and as the site of Peter and Paul's crucifixion, it gained a great degree of prominence by the

fourth century.[49] However, the papacy only began to exercise supreme power around the time of

Leo the Great (440-61).[50] One of the key arguments Leo used to argue for papal supremacy was

that the pope exclusively possessed the vicar of Peter—the continuation of the declaration Jesus

gave to Peter in Matthew 16.[51] However, before the time of Leo, Cyprian of Carthage argued that

the *cathedra Petri*, or Peter's chair, belonged to every bishop within the church, not just the

bishop of Rome.[52] In fact, Augustine of Hippo pushed back against Cyprian, not because

Augustine believed that the pope exclusively possessed the *cathedra Petri*, but because he

argued against the doctrine of *cathedra Petri* entirely.[53] Instead, "Augustine argued that Peter

served as a symbol of the whole church, whose faith and love he professed."[54] Therefore, Leo's

argument for papal infallibility is not well supported by church fathers before the fifth century.

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[49] Ferguson, *From Christ*, 302.

[50] Ibid., 303-304.

[51] Ibid., 304.

[52] Meyendorff, *Imperial Unity*, 61.

[53] J. Patout Burns Jr., *Augustine's Preached Theology: Living as the Body of Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2022), 18.

[54] Ibid.

After the collapse of the Western Roman empire, the shift towards Roman primacy became even more exaggerated, because "the clergy often looked for guidance towards the one apostolic see of the West, which was also located in the old imperial capital, [and so] the Roman bishop gained an increased prestige."[55] Even after the pope gained more prominence during the early medieval period, there was no evidence of belief in papal infallibility before 800 A.D.[56] Instead, the pope was simply understood to be the chief bishop in the West who, because of the importance of Rome and the various apologetics used to defend the papacy, increased in power throughout the first millennia of church history. Therefore, the papacy has a similar problem to the episcopal structure as a whole—its historical development allowed it to have a high potential for corruption and political interference by its very nature.

Original Jurisdiction of Ecumenial Councils

Given that the episcopal structure was not original to the church and that apostolic succession of the bishops of the early church was not guaranteed, if the ecumenical councils are not valid or universal, the episcopal churches have little historical ground to stand on. While arguments against the validity of the ecumenical councils could potentially be made, such arguments are unnecessarily contentious and have a propensity for theological errors. Therefore, this discussion about the ecumenical councils will focus on their intended scope: whether or not the ecumenical councils were meant to be authoritative for the entire catholic church or the Roman church exclusively.

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[55] Meyendorff, *Imperial Unity*, 23.

[56] Hasler, *How the Pope*, 153.

Constantine's Call and the Council of Nicaea

While Constantine may have had his own religious convictions about the Arian

controversy, the reason he called the council of Nicaea was not to support his own religious

position, but to promote unity in the empire.[57] However, even if Constantine had strong religious

convictions regarding Christian theology, his behavior did not reflect this. He executed political

enemies, including family members, "at the very time when Constantine was sponsoring and

presiding over the council of Nicea (325)...Nevertheless...the Orthodox Church has recognized

him as a Saint, 'equal to the Apostles.'"[58] That Constantine's main motivations behind calling

Nicaea were political is supported by how he gave legal validation to the decrees and canons of

the council and often enforced them by means of coercion.[59] After the council of Nicaea, the

state only protected Christianity in so long as it adhered to Nicaea, but non-Nicene Christianity

was persecuted after the council.[60] Prior to the Nicaea, Constantine had called the council of

Arles (313), which functioned similarly to Nicaea: Arles excommunicated Donatus and helped

end the Donatist schism in the West.[61] In this instance, the Donatists had appealed to

Constantine, because of a synod which denounced them; although this was the first instance of

the church appealing to a secular authority,[62] it suggests that the authority which bound the

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[57] Ferguson, *From Christ*, 184.

[58] Meyendorff, *Imperial Unity*, 6-7.

[59] Schaf, *History*, 172.

[60] Ibid.

[61] Ibid., 174.

[62] Ibid.

council of Arles was Constantine's rubber stamp of approval, not some God-given right of the

bishops at the council to make theological decisions. Likewise, given that Nicaea was called in

much the same way as the council of Arles, the binding authority for Nicaea came not from God,

but from Constantine. Therefore, because Constantine was the emperor of the Roman empire and

not the world (although he certainly wished he was), the intended authority of Nicaea only

stretches as far as the boundaries of the Roman empire and her vassals.

Implications from the Persian Church

The limited extent of the authority of the ecumenical councils is supported by the way the

Persian church interacted with the ecumenical councils. Of course, as already described, the

bishops from Persia were not involved in Nicaea and the Persian church was given the free

choice to adhere to or reject Nicaea. This alone suggests that early Christians envisioned the

ecumenical councils as binding only to the Roman church. However, the Persian church's

reaction, or lack thereof, to later ecumenical councils even more strongly suggests that the

Persian church did not see the ecumenical councils as binding and the Roman church did not

intend for the ecumenical councils to be binding to the Persian church. Notably, even though the

Synod of Mar Isaac was held in 410 A.D., the version of the Nicene creed which was presented

by the West to the council and which was subsequently affirmed by the council is the original

Nicene creed from 325 A.D.[63] This version lacks the updates to the creed which occurred at the

council of Constantinople in 381 A.D. and even contains the final clause which anathematized

non-Nicene Christians.[64] Although it is widely claimed that the Church of the East accepted the

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[63] The Synod of Mar `Ishaq, 5.

[64] This was not contained in the version from the council of Constantinople.

council of Constantinople, none of the councils of the Church of the East even addressed the

canons of Constantinople. Moreover, because the letter brought by Mar Marutha contained the

original Nicene creed, the Roman church may have not seen it necessary for the Persian church

to adhere to the council of Constantinople in order to be considered brothers in Christ.

Additionally, despite suggestions that the Church of the East rejected Ephesus, in reality,

there was just no Persian representation at Ephesus. Because the Synod of Mar Dadisho in 424

disallowed Persian bishops from seeking western guidance, the Church of the East's own canons

prevented any bishops from attending the council of Ephesus.[65] The Church of the East held its

own council which was binding on the church in Persia regarding similar christological subject

matters as Ephesus and Chalcedon—in 486, the church convened under Mar Acacius to discuss

christological matters and affirmed a definition similar, but not identical, to the Chalcedonian

definition.[66] This Acacian definition, per se, teaches "the unity of the *parsopa* of our Savior, as

perfect God and perfect man." [67] (Parsopa refers to the "distinguishing characteristic" of Christ's

person).[68] While the Acacian definition is not radically different from the Chalcedonian

definition, the Synod of Mar Acacius did not adopt in any way the Chalcedonian definition.

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[65] Robert A. Kitchen, "The Assyrian Church of the East" in *The Orthodox Christian World* (Oxfordshire, UK: Routledge, 2021), 80.

[66] Ishac, "Councils."

[67] "Synodicon Orientale," syri.ac: An annotated bibliography of Syriac resources online, http://syri.ac/synodiconorientale.

[68] Geevargese Chediath. "The Three Crucial Terms in Syriac Theology- Kyana, Qnoma, and Parsopa" in *The Harp (Vol. 15)*, ed. Geevarghese Panicker, Jacob Thekeparampil, and Abraham Kalakudi (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2011), 63.

Instead, because the Church of the East at this time was completely independent from the Roman church, it created its own definition which suited the Persian language in response to the particular issues within the Persian church.

The way in which the Church of the East responded to each of the first four ecumenical councils suggests that the Persian church did not view the ecumenical councils of the Roman church as binding. Likewise, the fact that the Roman church never addressed the Church of East's refusal to accept their ecumenical councils or excommunicate any members of the church in Persia suggests that the Roman church did not believe that Persia was within their ecclesiological jurisdiction. Along with the role of the emperor in convoking and enforcing the ecumenical councils, this suggests that the ecumenical councils were not originally meant to be universally binding on the whole church, but only the Roman church.[69]

Theological Interpretation

Church Polity

Although ecclesiology is often seen as lesser than other aspects of theology, such as Christology and soteriology, ecclesiology dictates how the church handles all other matters of theology. Therefore, having a proper church polity is of considerable importance. Despite the various reasons for the church adopting a monoepiscopal system being pragmatic at the time, the establishment of a hierarchical polity in episcopal churches led to rampant corruption. That being said, when the Protestant reformation happened, the strong leadership which the monoepiscopal

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[69] That is not to say that the bishops at these councils did not believe the decisions made at these councils were universally true. Rather, the bishops at these councils did not believe they had the authority to make declarative statements about what the Persian church (and for that matter, other extra-Roman churches) ought to do.

system brought to the table was abandoned by much of Christianity, leading to

denominationalism. The grand irony is that the monoepiscopal system was developed in part to

prevent divisions in the church. Therefore, while the monoepiscopal system broadly worked to

achieve its goals, it had unintended consequences of equal proportions to the problems which it

sought to limit.

The apostolic era of the church did not differentiate considerably between laymen and

clergy.[70] Instead, all Christians were seen as priests, with the sole mediator between God and

man being Christ.[71] While the early church did not abandon these concepts nominally, the church

practically moved away from these ideas as bishops and, to a lesser extent, priests grew to have

real, largely unchecked authority over their congregations. The apostolic era, however, did have

various offices where elders had special teaching and pastoral roles. However, the New

Testament does not describe these elders as having sacerdotal functions in the church—in no

way were the elders necessary for the dispensation of God's grace.[72] Instead, all Christians had a

sacerdotal function in the church, because all Christians are called to offer themselves as a

sacrifice to God.[73] Unfortunately, almost in step with the establishment of the episcopal system,

by the end of the third century, priestly functions and terminology were almost exclusively

applied to the clergy.[74]

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[70] Schaf, *History*, 119.

[71] Schaf, *History*, 119-120.

[72] Ibid., 120.

[73] Ibid., 120.

[74] Ibid., 121-122.

Moreover, the church following the apostolic age saw no difference between the positions of presbyter and bishop.[75] Instead, there were only two offices, as reflected in 1 Timothy 3: the elder and the deacon. Moreover, for the first few centuries A.D., the people and clergy of the congregation would elect candidates for future ministerial roles, including the bishop.[76] While it is difficult to say exactly how the very early church functioned ecclesiologically, these points are clear: sacerdotal functions belonged to all Christians alike,[77] churches typically possessed only two offices, and congregations had a great deal of say in the ordination of new clergy members. It should also be noted that, because there was a lack of ecclesiological uniformity among the congregations of the early church, the precise inner workings of post-apostolic ecclesiology are impossible to universally determine.

Sola Scriptura and Tradition

In the wake of widespread corruption and political intervention within the church, beginning in the fourth century, wholeheartedly trusting the traditions of the church as if they were infallibly seems unfeasible *prima facie*. Of course, the Catholic and Orthodox workarounds to this issue are that the traditions of the church are only infallible in certain instances: for the Catholics, when the Pope speaks with the approval of the college of bishops[78] and, for the Orthodox, when the whole college of bishops speaks formally in unison.[79] However, there are

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[75] Ibid., 132-133.

[76] Meyendorff, *Imperial Unity*, 44.

[77] Augustine also argued for this position in several of his sermons.;
Burns, *Augustine's*, 18.

[78] Second Vatican Council, "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium*," sec. 3.

[79] Hasler, *How the Pope*, 143.

glaring issues with these workarounds. If the ecumenical councils (i.e. the college of bishops) were not originally intended to be authoritative over all of Christendom, then arguing that these councils are infallible is somewhat tenuous. After all, the Church of the East could simply claim that their councils are infallible by the same logic, but the Church of the East's councils have some differences from the ecumenical councils, so both cannot be infallible. Therefore, this line of reasoning breaks down. Furthermore, because papal infallibility did not even exist conceptually until the middle of the medieval era, defending church tradition with papal infallibility is a non-starter.

In response to untrustworthiness of church tradition, the most logical response is to fall back on what can be trusted: Scripture. Many early church fathers, such as Irenaeus and Tertullian, suggest that Scripture is the foundation of all doctrine.[80] Hippolytus even went as far to say, "There is… one God, the knowledge of whom we gain from the Holy Scriptures, and from no other source."[81] Ultimately, the primary aspect of scripture which makes it necessary to be relied on is its infallible authority.[82] Unlike other sources, including the church fathers and ecumenical councils, Scripture is given by God (2 Tim. 3:16-17) and has always had authority which stretches over all territories. While the current tradition of the episcopal churches is like a stick which has been measured against a stick which itself was measured against a stick ten times over before the first stick was measured against a ruler, Scripture is the infallible ruler itself. The

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[80] W. H. Oliver and E. Oliver, "Sola Scriptura: Authority Versus Interpretation?" *Acta Theologica* 40, no. 1 (01, 2020): 106. ProQuest.

[81] Ibid.

[82] Ibid., 112.

corruption in the church from the first few centuries testifies to the inability of the successive

measuring sticks of tradition to accurately maintain doctrine. Therefore, *sola scriptura* is a

necessary doctrine, not for biblical or theological reasons, but for practical reasons.

Biblical Application

Matthew 18: Church Discipline

> If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If
> he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two
> others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or
> three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to
> listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly, I say to
> you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on
> earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about
> anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or
> three are gathered in my name, there am I among them. (Matt. 18:15-20)

In this passage, Jesus gives the disciples some instructions on church discipline. At face

value, this passage may seem like it does not have much to do with the historical church.

However, this passage discusses how sin in the church ought to be handled and possibly alludes

to sacerdotal functions. In this passage, Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 19:15b, "Only on the

evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses shall a charge be established."[83] This passage in

Deuteronomy is discussing how a suspect ought to be tried for violating the law. Therefore,

contextually, Jesus is most likely not limiting the witnesses with this power to "bind" and

"loose" sins to the apostles and clergy—instead, this saying applies to all Christians.

Additionally, verse 18 carries exegetical significance in this passage, because the precise

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[83] David L. Turner, *Matthew (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament)* (Ada, MI: Baker
Academic, 2008), 445. ProQuest.

meanings of binding and loosing, to some extent, dictate the correct interpretation of the whole

passage. However, because the surrounding verses in the passage discuss confronting believers

about their sins, verse 18 most likely has nothing to do with the forgiveness and remission of sin.

Instead, verse 18 is most likely suggesting that, if multiple God-fearing Christians agree that

something is or is not a sin, that declaration is binding. In fact, the Greek text uses perfect

periphrastic participles with the future indicative of εἰμι. Therefore, these verbs should not be

understood as "shall be bound" and "shall be loosed," but as 'shall have been bound' and 'shall

have been loosed.' Not only does this construction reiterate that the emphasis of verse 18 is on

declaring whether or not certain actions are sinful, but it also shows that God, not the church,

determines the sinfulness of an action—Christians simply recognize God's determination.

Furthermore, these statements should be taken to apply to Christians as a whole, not just the

apostles or church leadership. Verses 15-17 are clearly meant to apply to all Christians, not just

the apostles. Because there is no grammatical change from verse 17 to 18, there is no reason to

believe that the subjects of Jesus's commands change between these verses. This reaffirms the

earliest church practices, where sacerdotal functions were shared by all believers and clergy had

no special sacerdotal power. Additionally, this limits the authority which any church can claim

its clergy have: no clergy member should claim to be able to remit sins, for instance, because

remittance belongs to God alone.

1 Timothy 3: Church Structure

1 Timothy 3:1-13 discusses the qualifications for both overseers, or bishops, and

deacons.[84] Notably, Paul only mentions two offices, making no distinction between bishop and

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[84] Because of the length of the passage, it will not be fully included here.

elder. In fact, throughout the New Testament, these terms are used interchangeably,[85] cementing

the historical evidence that the early church had an ecclesiological system similar to the modern

presbyterian system. Moreover, contextually, these roles were meant to be held in each

congregation, not for the development of a superstructure throughout the whole church because,

in 1 Timothy, Paul wrote to Timothy for the sake of helping Timothy lead various

congregations.[86] Finally, the fact that Paul focuses only on the qualifications, not the roles, for

both of these offices, which are almost exclusively character-based, shows that Paul cared most

for the moral integrity of the church. Although the concerns of the early church which led to the

development of the monoepiscopal are understandable, they show a lack of care for the moral

integrity of the church and trust in God to provide in times of persecution.

Romans 11: A Church of Theseus

> But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, although a wild olive shoot, were grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing root of the olive tree, do not be arrogant toward the branches. If you are, remember it is not you who support the root, but the root that supports you. Then you will say, "Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in." That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand fast through faith. So do not become proud, but fear. For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you. Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God's kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness. Otherwise you too will be cut off. And even they, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again. For if you were cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these, the natural branches, be grafted back into their own olive tree. (Rom. 11:17-24)

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[85] Thomas D. Lea, *1, 2 Timothy, Titus : An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 1992), 99.

[86] Lea, *1,2 Timothy*, 99-100.

In this passage, Paul is supporting his ministry to the gentiles by arguing that they have been grafted into the people of God, while unbelieving Jews have been cut off from the people of God. However, Paul also warns the gentiles that they can also be cut off and explains his hope that all of the unbelieving Jewish people might be grafted back into the people of God. Properly, the people of God may be called the church. Paul's warning to the gentiles in this passage suggests to his audience that, if they sin and rebel against God, they might quickly be cut off.[87]

Throughout this passage, Paul explains that the people of God are those who abide in the "olive tree." Although the branches are replaced over time, the identity of the "olive tree" remains the people of God. On the other hand, the cut off branches are in no way the people of God, even if they have some connection to it. This hearkens back to a well known paradox, the ship of Theseus. In this paradox, a man named Theseus owns a ship, which gets maintained over time. During the duration of Theseus's ownership of the ship, every single plank gets replaced. So the question may be posed: if the original planks of the ship were collected and reassembled, would the reassembled ship be the ship of Theseus? Or would the ship which Theseus himself has maintained be the ship of Theseus? In this example, the ship of Theseus is the ship which Theseus had maintained, because Theseus's ownership of the ship is most essential to what the ship of Theseus is. Likewise, the people of God are the people of God, not because of specific individuals who belong to God, but because God has redeemed the people of God through His Son (Rom. 11:26-20). When it comes to the historical church, over time, the episcopal churches abandoned those things which God had set out for them, including their original church structure,

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[87] Aaron Sherwood, *Romans: A Structural, Thematic, and Exegetical Commentary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020), 402.

moral purity, and unity. Of course, many people in these episcopal churches are genuinely regenerate. However, no one church organization, or collection of individual branches, is the people of God. Instead, the people of God are an invisible assortment of branches across a variety of churches, which share participation in Christ.

Conclusions

In the present day, no episcopal church accurately represents the universal, institutional church, because these churches are more so a product of political pressure than the original movement which Christ founded. After examining the development of the Church of the East as a separate development from the Roman church, analyzing the evolution of the episcopal structure, and determining the original jurisdiction of the ecumenical councils, this thesis has concluded that there is no one church which can claim sole ownership of the description 'one, holy, catholic, and apostolic.' Because no such church exists today, scripture, instead of tradition, should be followed as the church's ultimate authority, and the church's original presbyterian-esque ecclesiology should be mimicked.

Applications and Further Consideration

Protestants today who are considering converting to Catholicism and Orthodoxy, because of the claimed historicity of these churches, should reconsider. Although there are numerous issues exclusive to Protestantism, a lack of historicity is not one of those issues. Instead, because no one church can rightfully claim to be the true historical church, Protestants should focus more on doctrine and beliefs when considering dominations. The historical claims of the Catholic and Orthodox churches should not act as stumbling blocks towards believers today.

The splintering of Protestantism into many denominations still needs to be addressed. As Paul discusses in 1 Corinthians 1, divisions, especially over trivial issues, within the church are unacceptable. The very anti-authoritarian nature of Protestantism is partially to blame—*sola scriptura* and individualism have contributed to everyone under the sun having different opinions. However, this does not necessarily mean that episcopal churches are correct in their opinions. While this thesis has concluded that no church can exclusively claim to be the historical church, one question still remains unanswered: *Which one has it right?*

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