From Elders to Denominations

A Deep Dive into the Evolution of Church Leadership & Structure

(c. 60 AD – Present)

The Core Tension

Scripture (c. 60-90 AD)

The New Testament consistently describes a collective, plural leadership model. Authority is shared among a council of elders in each city, with no single individual holding supreme power.

History (c. 200 AD)

By the 3rd century, the universal model is a single, powerful Bishop in each city. This structure dominated Christianity for over 1,300 years. The question is: *How and why did this shift happen?*

New Testament Terms



Presbyteros

"Elder." Refers to the maturity and dignity of the office. Used to describe the council of leaders.



Episkopos

"Overseer." Refers to the function or job description. Used interchangeably with "Elder" and “Bishop” (Acts 20:17, 28).



Diakonos

"Servant" or "Deacon." A distinct office focused on practical service and physical needs (1 Tim 3).

The Biblical Structure: Plurality

Always Plural

The New Testament never instructs a church to be led by "a pastor" or "a bishop" in the singular. It is always "elders" (plural) in every church (Acts 14:23) and "bishops" (plural) in one city (Phil 1:1).
This provided accountability, shared burden, and prevented one person from dominating the flock.



The "One City, One Church" Concept

City-Wide Unity

In the 1st Century, the "Church" was a city-wide entity. Paul wrote to "The Church in Rome," not "The Churches."

Though they met in many homes, they were one body under one governance.

Doctrinal Interdependence

The Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15)

- **The Issue:** A dispute over circumcision arose in Judea that the local church could not solve.
- **The Action:** They did not claim "local autonomy." They sent delegates to Jerusalem.
- **The Precedent:** Doctrinal conflict was resolved by a wider council of Apostles and Elders, establishing a pattern of accountability.

Interconnected Authority

While day-to-day governance was local, the Apostles exercised authority over ALL churches. They set the "traditions" that all were expected to follow (2 Thess 2:15).

The Crisis of the 2nd Century

The Leadership Vacuum

By 100 AD, the Apostles were dead. The "living voice" of authority was gone.

The Rise of Heresy

Movements like **Gnosticism** exploded. They claimed to have "secret knowledge" from the Apostles.

They used Christian terms but denied Christ's physical body (Docetism). The plural-elder model struggled to speak with one unified voice against these coordinated attacks.

Shift 1: The Center of Unity

Ignatius of Antioch (c. 110 AD)

Facing martyrdom, Ignatius wrote 7 letters urging unity. He is the first to clearly separate the "Bishop" from the "Presbyters."

His argument was practical: *"Follow the bishop as Jesus follows the Father."* To separate from the Bishop was to separate from the Church.

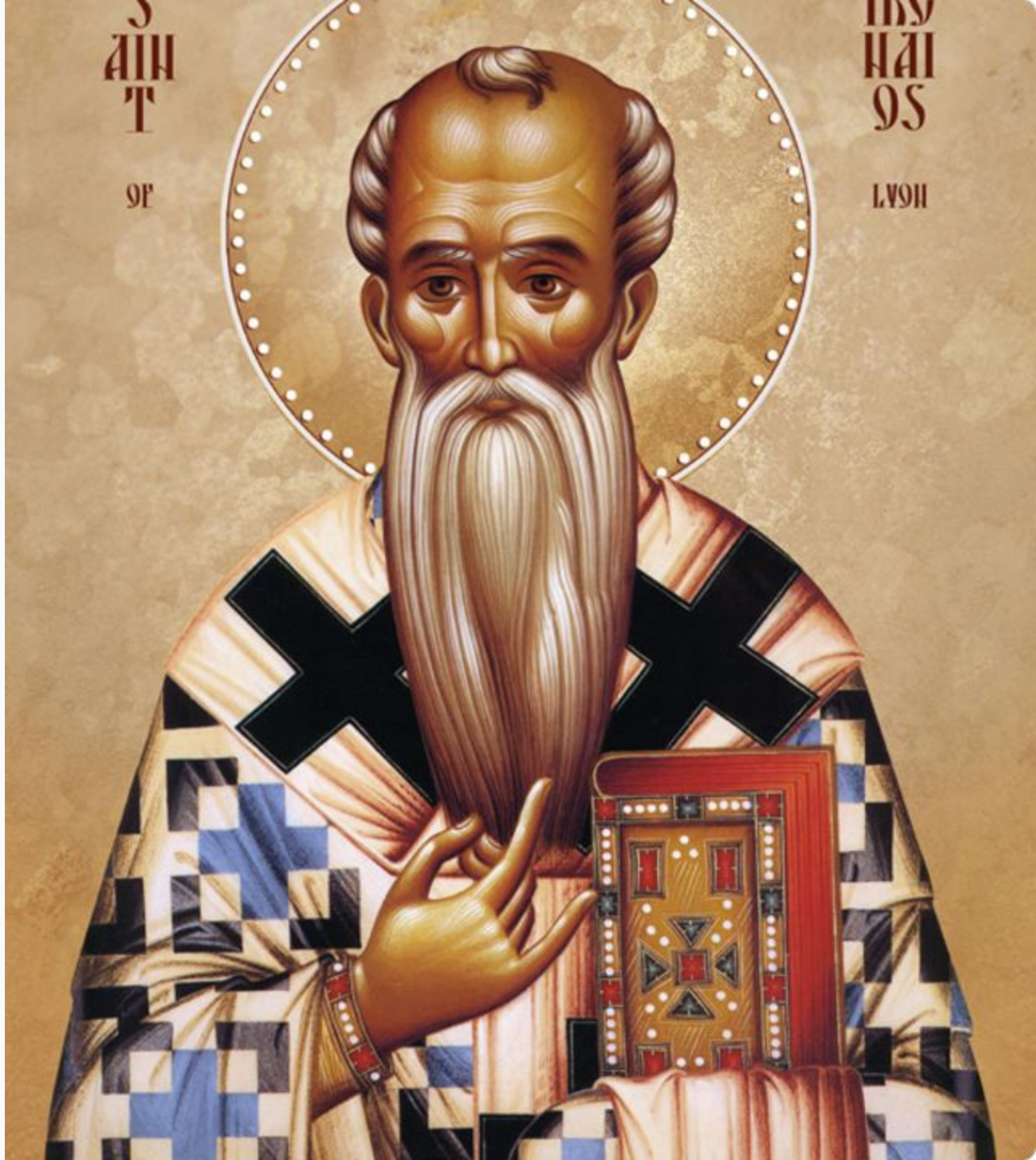


Shift 2: The Guarantor of Truth

Irenaeus of Lyons (c. 180 AD)

Irenaeus championed **Apostolic Succession**. He argued that truth is public, not secret.

We know the truth because we can list the men the Apostles appointed as Bishops. The Bishop became the living link to the Apostles and the "Guarantor" of the faith.



The 2nd Century View of Authority

Not Just "Scripture Alone"

For the early church, authority was found in two equal streams flowing from the Apostles:

1. **Scripture:** The written letters.
2. **Tradition:** The oral teaching and "rule of faith."

The Bishop's Role

The Bishop was not seen as replacing Scripture, but as the **Guardian** of it.

They believed they were adapting the *Structure* (means) to protect the *Doctrine* (end).

Scholars of the Word to pass it on

Evidence of the "Hand-Off"

Polycarp of Smyrna

A disciple of the Apostle John. Irenaeus (who knew him) wrote that Polycarp was "appointed by apostles in Asia as bishop." He forms a verified link between the Apostolic age and the 2nd century.

Clement of Rome

Known by Peter and Paul. In 96 AD, he wrote that the Apostles, foreseeing conflict, "appointed the aforesaid persons... and gave instructions that... other approved men should succeed them."

The Exception: Alexandria

"...the presbyters always chose one of their own number, placed him in a higher grade, and called him bishop."

— St. Jerome (on the custom of Alexandria until c. 250 AD)

Alexandria held onto the collective, elder-led model much longer than Rome or Antioch, proving the transition was gradual, not instant.

Explosive Growth

200 AD: ~200–400 Bishops. Christians were <1% of the Empire.

325 AD: ~1,800 Bishops. Christians were ~10%.

By the Council of Nicaea, the church had transformed from a small urban network into a massive, empire-wide institution requiring complex administration.



The Parish System Emerges

The Problem

As the church spread to rural villages, the single City Bishop could no longer shepherd everyone personally.

The Solution

The Bishop sent **Presbyters** (Priests) to these villages to lead local worship.

The Bishop became a regional overseer (Diocese), and the Presbyter became the local pastor. This is the origin of the Catholic/Orthodox structure.

The Medieval Bishop-Prince

From 400–1500 AD, the office changed drastically.

Bishops became feudal lords, owning vast lands and commanding armies. The "Bishop of Rome" became the Pope, claiming supreme authority.

The role shifted from "Martyr-Shepherd" to "Wealthy Administrator," leading to deep corruption.



Voices of Protest



Waldensians (1170s)

Preached poverty and simplicity. Rejected the wealthy hierarchy and translated the Bible into local languages.



John Wycliffe (1370s)

Argued that Scripture is the only authority, not the Pope. His followers (Lollards) produced the first English Bible.



Jan Hus (1400s)

Preached that Christ, not the Pope, is the head of the Church. Burned at the stake for challenging the hierarchy.

The Reformation (1500s)

The 16th Century brought a massive effort to return "Ad Fontes" (Back to the Sources).

Reformers agreed the Medieval system was corrupt, but they disagreed on the solution. This led to three distinct paths for church structure.



Path 1: Abolish It (Presbyterian)

The Logic

John Calvin argued that "Bishop" and "Elder" in the NT are the same office. The distinction was a human invention that led to tyranny.

The Structure

Returned to the **Council of Elders** model. Local churches are governed by a "Session" of elders. Regional churches are governed by a "Presbytery." No single person holds supreme power.

Path 2: Reform It (Lutheran)

The Logic

Martin Luther was pragmatic. He didn't mind the structure if the doctrine was correct. He focused on the "Priesthood of All Believers."

The Structure

Kept the role of overseer but changed the function. Bishops became **"Superintendents."** Their job was to serve pastors and ensure good teaching, not to rule as princes.

Path 3: Keep It (Anglican)

The Logic

The English Reformation was political. King Henry VIII wanted to break from Rome but liked the stability of the hierarchy.

The Structure

Kept the entire Catholic structure: Bishops, Archbishops, and Apostolic Succession. The only change was the Head: The Monarch replaced the Pope.

The Radical Reformation

The Anabaptists

They felt Luther and Calvin didn't go far enough. They rejected any State connection.

They believed the "True Church" was a local gathering of baptized believers, free from outside control.

Local Autonomy

This birthed the concept that **The Local Church** is the highest human authority.

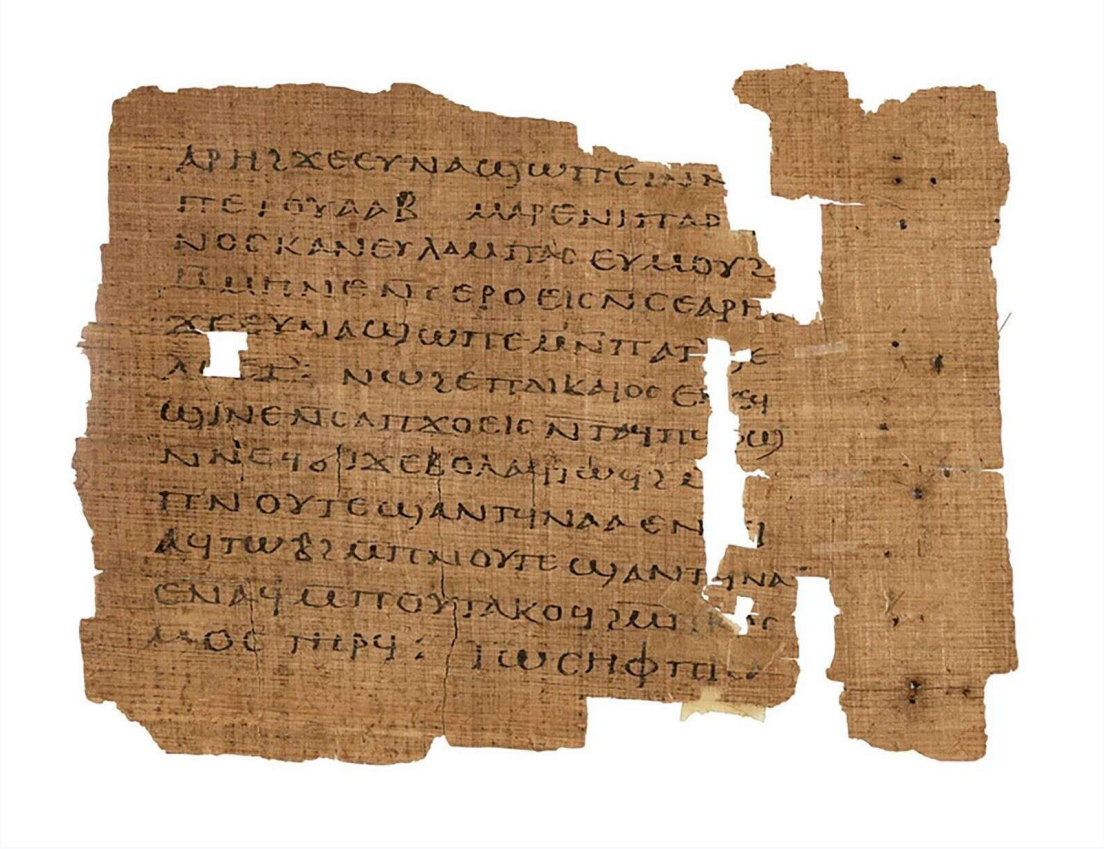
No Bishop, no Presbytery, no King. Only the congregation under Christ.

Modern Theology: Sola Scriptura

The End of Councils

For Baptists and Evangelicals, the completion of the Bible changed everything.

We don't need Councils to *decide* truth because the Bible is sufficient. The task is now interpretation, not legislation.



Redefining "The Church"

Ancient View

The Church = The City.

All believers in a geographic area are one body, under one governance.

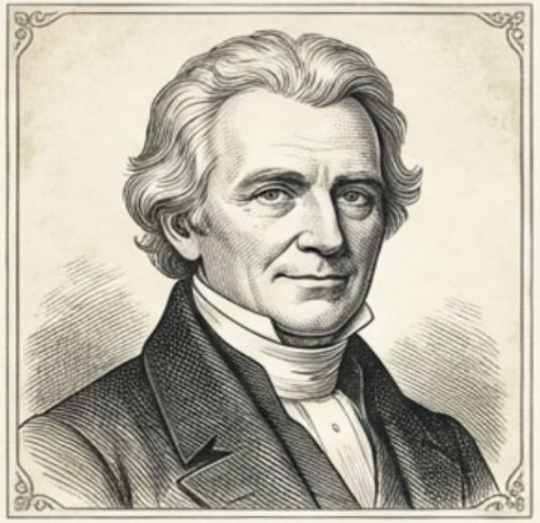
Modern View

The Church = The Congregation.

Any group of believers gathering together is a full church. Geography doesn't matter.

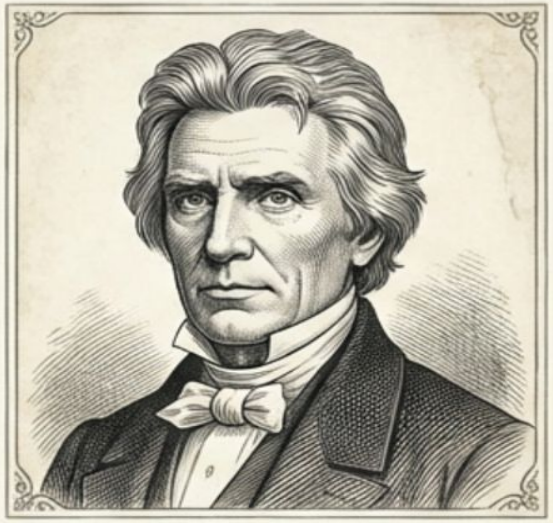
The Radical Reset: Stone and Campbell

Rejecting European Creeds to Restore the Ancient Order



Barton W. Stone: The Revivalist

- **Focus:** Grace, Holy Spirit, Apocalyptic Expectancy.
- **Key Event:** Cane Ridge Revival (1801).
- Prioritised piety and Spirit over rigid doctrine.



Alexander Campbell: The Rationalist

- **Focus:** Truth, Logic, Bible as Constitution.
- **Key Work:** *The Declaration and Address.*
- Viewed the Bible as a blueprint of facts to be understood through reason.

Shared Motto: 'We are Christians only, but not the only Christians."

NotebookLM

The Handshake of 1832

Lexington, Kentucky

The merger of two movements: Barton Stone (Grace/Revival) and Alexander Campbell (Truth/Reason).



The Great Experiment

Goal: To unite all believers by discarding denominational labels and following Scripture alone.

The Tension

A movement constantly wrestling between being Ecumenical (uniting all Christians) and Sectarian (restoring the "perfect" pattern).

"Let us no longer be Stoneites or Campbellites... but let us go back to the sacred script and live by its light."

NotebookLM

The Great Divergence: Civil War & Constitutional Hermeneutics

The Hamiltonian North



Key Figure:
James Garfield
(Union General, President)

Hermeneutic:
Loose Construction

"If the Bible doesn't forbid it, we are free to do it."

(Allowed instruments, societies, open fellowship)



The Jeffersonian South



Key Figure:
David Lipscomb
(Editor, Gospel Advocate)

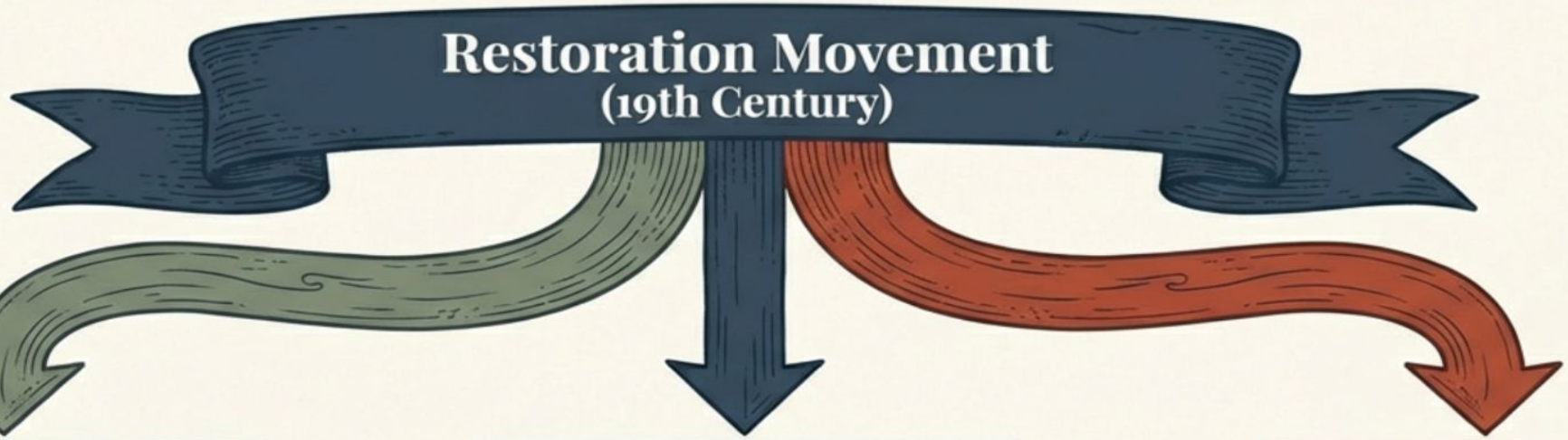
Hermeneutic:
Strict Construction

"If the Bible doesn't command it, we don't do it."

(Rejected instruments, missionary societies, government involvement)

NotebookLM

The Three Streams of the 20th Century



Disciples of Christ

Trajectory:
Liberal / Progressive

Embraced critical scholarship and ecumenism.

Christian Churches (Independent)

Trajectory:
The Middle Ground

Retained orthodoxy and instruments. Focused on evangelism (NACC).

Churches of Christ (A Cappella)

Trajectory:
Sectarian / Strict

Influenced by Lipscomb. Focus on “Patternism” and “Silence of Scripture” as prohibition.

NotebookLM

The Age of Denominations

Because of "Local Autonomy," we have Denominations instead of Governments.

These are voluntary networks for missions and fellowship. They cannot force a local church to do anything.

We have traded the **Structure of Unity** (the Bishop) for the **Freedom of Conscience** (Local Autonomy).



The 2,000 Year Arc

1st C.
Plural Elders

2nd C.
Single Bishop

12th C.
Bishop-Prince

16th C.
Reformation

21st C.
Denominations

Questions?

Discussion