

Cambridge University Press

0521891566 - From Synagogue to Church: Public Services and offices in the Earliest Christian Communities - James Tunstead Burtchaell

Frontmatter/Prelims

[More information](#)

This important work engages with a long historical debate: were the earliest Christians under the direction of ordained ministers, or under the influence of inspired laypeople? Who was in charge: bishops, elders and deacons, or apostles, prophets and teachers? Rather than trace church offices backwards (they were already clearly established by the second century), Burtchaell examines the contemporary Jewish communities and finds evidence that Christians simply continued the offices of the synagogue. Thus, he asserts that from the very first they were presided over by officers. The author then advances the provocative view that in the first century it was not the officers who spoke with most authority. They presided, but did not lead, and deferred to more charismatic laypeople. Burtchaell sees the evidence in favour of the Catholic/Orthodox/Anglican view that bishops have always presided in the Christian church. At the same time he argues alongside the Protestants that in its formative era the church deferred most to the judgment of those who were inspired, yet never ordained.

Cambridge University Press

0521891566 - From Synagogue to Church: Public Services and offices in the Earliest
Christian Communities - James Tunstead Burtchaell

Frontmatter/Prelims

[More information](#)

FROM SYNAGOGUE TO CHURCH

Cambridge University Press

0521891566 - From Synagogue to Church: Public Services and offices in the Earliest
Christian Communities - James Tunstead Burtchaell

Frontmatter/Prelims

[More information](#)

FROM SYNAGOGUE TO CHURCH

*Public services and offices in the earliest Christian
communities*

JAMES TUNSTEAD BURTCHAELL



Cambridge University Press

0521891566 - From Synagogue to Church: Public Services and offices in the Earliest Christian Communities - James Tunstead Burtchaell

Frontmatter/Prelims

[More information](#)

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York NY 10011-4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

<http://www.cambridge.org>

© Cambridge University Press 1992

This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 1992
Reprinted 1994 (twice), 1995
First paperback edition 2004

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data

Burtchaell, James Tunstead.

From synagogue to church : public services and offices in the earliest Christian communities / James Tunstead Burtchaell.

p. cm.

Includes index.

ISBN 0 521 41892 5 hardback

1. Church polity – History. – Early church, ca. 30–600. 2. Pastoral theology – History. 3. Synagogues – Organization and administration – History. 4. Pastoral theology (Judaism) – History. I. Title.

BV648.B83 1992

262'.1'09015 – DC29 91-36390 CIP

ISBN 0 521 41892 5 hardback

ISBN 0 521 89156 6 paperback

Cambridge University Press

0521891566 - From Synagogue to Church: Public Services and offices in the Earliest
Christian Communities - James Tunstead Burtchaell

Frontmatter/Prelims

[More information](#)

*To Joyce and Jerry Hank
who in diverse ways and sundry manners
both tangible and intangible
have urged forward the inquiry set forth here
a grateful author
dedicates this work*

Cambridge University Press

0521891566 - From Synagogue to Church: Public Services and offices in the Earliest
Christian Communities - James Tunstead Burtchaell

Frontmatter/Prelims

[More information](#)*Contents*

<i>Preface</i>	<i>page xi</i>
1 The Reformation: challenge to an old consensus	1
2 The nineteenth century: a new consensus is formulated	61
3 The early twentieth century: the consensus is disputed	101
4 The last fifty years: the consensus restated, rechallenged, reused	136
5 A search for a new hypothesis	180
6 Jewish community organization in the later Second Temple period	201
7 The officers of the synagogue	228
8 Community organization in the early Christian settlement	272
9 A conclusion	339
<i>Index auctorum</i>	358
<i>Index locorum</i>	362

Cambridge University Press

0521891566 - From Synagogue to Church: Public Services and offices in the Earliest Christian Communities - James Tunstead Burtchaell

Frontmatter/Prelims

[More information](#)

Preface

This is a study of the community organization of the Christian communities as it developed through the first century of their experience. In particular I have inquired into the public service roles with which those communities were provided: what those services and those offices were and what was expected of their incumbents.

I began with two convictions and one supposition. One conviction has to do with the value of looking into the past. I approached this project with an inveterate interest in the Christian church and its ministries. In our present time some of the more stimulating questions arise from attempts to reconstrue what public office ought rightly be. But I did not undertake the study in order to justify any proposal or theory I already had. I did it because of my belief that one can rarely investigate a tradition in the distant past – and the Christian tradition is one I am most familiar with – without jostling one’s perspectives enough to make the inquiry worthwhile.

When friends and colleagues learned that I hoped to write a history of office in the earliest church, they typically would ask if I were going to argue for the ordination of women. I had personally been on record in favor of that for nearly two decades. And there are other issues, such as whether church officers ought be stipendiary, or whether ministry ought be a profession for which young people study as for a career; these questions may ultimately carry more significance. But none of that is to the point. There is no ancient precedent which by itself legitimates any contemporary policy. However, one who delves cleanly and curiously into the way people did things long ago and, if possible, why they did so, is invariably helped to address contemporary issues and decisions from an advantaged perspective. History is suggestive – compellingly so. But it is not compelling.

That was the first conviction. The second moved from purpose to method. When approaching a historical topic it is best to study all

Cambridge University Press

0521891566 - From Synagogue to Church: Public Services and offices in the Earliest Christian Communities - James Tunstead Burtchaell

Frontmatter/Prelims

[More information](#)

xii

Preface

primary sources before allowing oneself to look at the secondary materials. I was aware, from the normal traffic of interest and reading, that this was a subject over which scholars had been quarreling for some centuries, and I had an undefined recollection of all that debate. But I took it as a duty to read again through every document that might provide direct evidence of Christian life during the first hundred years, before beginning to study what latter-day academics had made of those primary sources. By following such a method one sacrifices the initial advantage of knowing the “state-of-the-art” discussion. On the other hand, one gains the ability to be exposed to the original texts more freely than if one’s mental agenda were already furnished by what others had determined to be most significant.

My assumption was a simple one. When I was a young man I was given much training in scripture and liturgy. I learned that these were treasures which the early church came by through inheritance. They were old when they were new. And it was natural to assume that the pattern of community organization in those earliest churches may also have been an heirloom from the Jewish past. So before reading the Christian sources it was important to read all that was available from Judaism during the first centuries BC and AD. My surmise was that since the first Christians were Jews who took a long while to reflect and admit to themselves reluctantly how their faith might be leading them away from their fellow Jews, they would instinctively create communities in the way familiar to them: following the patterns of the hellenistic Jewish synagogue. The first step, then, was to learn how synagogues functioned in the late Second Temple period, even before examining the Christian documents.

Only after turning to the secondary literature did I discover that my assumption had not been shared by the scholars whose work was most respected. The hypothesis which my inquiry had reinforced, not subverted, differed in significant respects from the received wisdom. For instance, the so-called monarchical episcopate which had been deplored by Ritschl, Baur, Lightfoot, Harnack, Lietzmann, von Campenhausen, Schweizer and others, cannot be considered as merely a clerical take-over of a church that had throughout the first century been spirited and spontaneous. I found it instead to have been a reassertion of a community organization that was in formal continuity with the Jewish past. My finding, as it developed, was that the emergence of various categories of officer in the early second

Cambridge University Press

0521891566 - From Synagogue to Church: Public Services and offices in the Earliest Christian Communities - James Tunstead Burtchaell

Frontmatter/Prelims

[More information](#)*Preface*

xiii

century was not simply the stifling of a vigorous lay age in Christian history. It was the reinvigoration of a community organization that had been customary in Israel and had served as a foundational structure for the new Christian groups since before they were very conscious of it.

Eventually it became clear that since the nineteenth century there has been a consensus among most historical scholars that has coached the thinking of most theologians who have derived their understanding of the early church from the historians. According to that consensus a vitally new kind of community arose among the disciples of Jesus. It enjoyed two or perhaps three generations in which the Spirit was given free play, without formal structures or an official establishment. It was a subsequent threat of division within the community, and of perverse teaching, that persuaded the faithful to consolidate under the protection of a clerical regime with a hierarchy of officers. Christian life, so this story goes, has never been as animated since then.

Scholars and churchfolk who are made wistful by this consensus study the album of sketchy and fading memories we have of that era in our church's youth, and take it as our norm for possible reforms today. My concern in this book is to look quite carefully at the same album where I claim to see that, whatever you wish to make of it, there were the same offices in the church of the first century that we can see there in the second century. Their incumbents, however, were behaving quite differently in those two periods.

The order of exposition is often the reverse of the order of discovery. My route of inquiry led me first through the ancient literary and archeological evidence, and then to the modern theories that have interpreted that evidence. Having attempted to assess and reassess each corpus in light of the other, I now set them forth in the opposite order: first reviewing the dynamics and the validity of the modern arguments, and then reconstructing the community organization of the early Christians as seems best justified by the evidence.

The present time is an unsettled one for anybody to attempt a synthetic historical study of either the Jewish synagogues or the Christian churches during the first century AD. In the fields of Jewish and Christian historical scholarship some of the most energetic and aggressive research is aiming to discredit an old conviction: that there was such a thing as a standard synagogue or a normative church during that period. Professor Jacob Neusner has been insisting

Cambridge University Press

0521891566 - From Synagogue to Church: Public Services and offices in the Earliest Christian Communities - James Tunstead Burtchaell

Frontmatter/Prelims

[More information](#)

xiv

Preface

among historians of Judaism that there was a sharp diversity among homeland and Diaspora Jewry. The hope to describe a uniform community of observance is, in any case, rendered implausible by the paucity of reliable evidence and its low historical yield when examined critically. This view has been given added momentum by the publication of the Qumran and other sectarian literature, and by recent archeological finds as interpreted, for instance, by Professor A. Thomas Kraabel. A parallel but distinct revisionism among Christian historians was initiated by Walter Bauer of Göttingen, who insisted that for centuries there were several versions of Christianity existing independently of one another, with equal claims to authenticity. The discovery of the Nag Hammadi library, and the concurrence of scholars like Professor Robert M. Grant, combined to make Bauer's challenge the more credible.¹

In parallel fashion, each revisionist school is suggesting that it was the press of events and the community's reactions, rather than any intrinsic character or imperative, which caused rabbinic Judaism and Catholic Christianity, respectively, to emerge as dominant.

My ambition here is not to assert that there was a uniform local model for either synagogue or church at the time when some Jews were first hailing Jesus as Messiah. The paucity and ambiguity of the evidence would seem, however, to restrain us equally from concluding that there was no shared pattern within either community. What Robert Wilken has written of early Christian sources seems as valid of their Jewish contemporaries:

[W]e miss the character of the early Christian movement if we see it primarily as a history of diverging traditions, each with its own logic and

¹ It is difficult to select appropriate citations to the work of Jacob Neusner, whose abundant publications make him a Scheherezade among scholars. See his *The Rabbinic Traditions about the Pharisees before 70* (Leiden: Brill, 1971), 3 vols.; *From Politics to Piety: The Emergence of Pharisaic Judaism* (New York: Ktav, 1979); "The Formation of Rabbinic Judaism: Yavneh (Jamnia) from A.D. 70 to 100," in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* (hereafter ANRW), II, 19.2 (1979), 3–42. A[lf] T[homas] Kraabel, "The Diaspora Synagogue: Archeological and Epigraphic Evidence since Sukenik," *ANRW*, II, 19.1 (1979), 477–510; "Six Diaspora Synagogues," in *Ancient Synagogues: The State of Research*, ed. Joseph Gutman (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1981), 79–91; "The Roman Diaspora: Six Questionable Assumptions," *Journal of Jewish Studies*, 33, 1–2 (1982), 445–464; "Paganism and Judaism: The Sardis Evidence," in *Paganisme, Judaïsme, Christianisme: Influences et affrontements dans le monde antique*, ed. A[ndré] Benoit et al. (Paris: Boccard, 1979), 13–33. Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, trans. Philadelphia Seminar on Christian Origins, ed. Robert A. Kraft and Gerhard Krodel (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971); this translates and augments the second edition of *Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1964 [1st edn. 1934]). Robert M. Grant, *Second Century Christianity: A Collection of Fragments* (London: SPCK, 1964).

Cambridge University Press

0521891566 - From Synagogue to Church: Public Services and offices in the Earliest Christian Communities - James Tunstead Burtchaell

Frontmatter/Prelims

[More information](#)*Preface*

xv

internal coherence, existing alongside of one another. A “center” was being shaped and formed during this period, and it is historically important to understand how and why this sense of communal identity emerged. I have suggested that this “center” cannot be defined solely in doctrinal terms, i.e. solely in terms of religious life, for it included, among other things, behavior and way of life, liturgical practice, even a sense of “belonging,” of church if you will, and this sense of communal identity was present long before there were definable standards by which to measure it.²

What one can claim to see is a type, a format that is recurrent enough to be traditional and – give or take any of its elements – identifiable as a customary pattern of community. I argue as well that among the elements of community organization, some are more regular and others more marginal.

If we inspect those elements which appear to be most regular, we shall find that they include the offices of elder, community chief and assistant. Despite the fact that their appearance is so scattered geographically and temporally – indeed, for the very reason that they do appear so randomly yet widely – I am persuaded that they were typical in late Second Temple Jewish synagogues, and subsequently in the early Christian synagogues, or churches.

The tasks and the political style of each office appear to have been in flux within both communities. There also seems to have been a fluidity of titles, which eventually yielded to distinct nomenclatures. Out of a miscellany of generic and descriptive synonyms, each tradition eventually selected its own, which then were converted into specific titles. In all three features – diversity changing to standardization, generic synonyms retiring before a specific title, and intentional differentiation of titles from rival traditions – the Jews and Christians were continuing what Jewish sectaries had done throughout the first centuries BC and AD.

This inquiry began for me in Princeton, during the latter months of a leave of absence from teaching duties at Notre Dame in 1980–81. The work was pursued during the intervening summers, and acquired momentum during another study leave at Cambridge in 1985–86. Final revisions were possible during another visiting fellowship at Princeton in 1990–91. Along the way I have incurred debts for which both honesty and gratitude require acknowledgement. I am beholden to the Department of Religion at Princeton University, and especially

² Robert L. Wilken, “Diversity and Unity in Early Christianity,” *The Second Century*, 1 (1981), 109–110.

Cambridge University Press

0521891566 - From Synagogue to Church: Public Services and offices in the Earliest Christian Communities - James Tunstead Burtchaell

Frontmatter/Prelims

[More information](#)

xvi

Preface

to John Wilson, John Gager and Albert Raboteau who as chairmen welcomed me for two years and several summers as a visiting fellow there. I am likewise appreciative of the welcome given by the Faculty of Divinity in the University of Cambridge, to which I was able to return as a visiting scholar twenty years since going down from there after happy years as a research student. St Edmund's College elected me into a visiting fellowship, and Gonville and Caius College, then and during a subsequent summer, offered me the membership of their senior combination room, thus restoring me to the two households that had offered welcome when I first went up to pursue my training as a theological historian. And my own University and Department of Theology are owed thanks for giving me freedom from my other duties to complete this task.

Notre Dame must also be thanked for several grants from the Albert Zahm Travel Fund that tided me over two summers. Even more am I grateful for being allowed to reside at the home of Jacques Maritain in Princeton, his benefaction to us which Notre Dame once put at the disposal of its faculty members who needed a haven for study. I must express appreciation to the Council for International Exchange of Scholars in this country and the Fulbright Commission in the United Kingdom for a grant-in-aid as a Senior Fulbright Scholar; to the Fund for Theological Scholarship and Research of the Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada for a research grant; and to the American Philosophical Society for a research grant.

I have derived profound scholarly benefit from the Firestone Library of Princeton University, the Speer Library of Princeton Theological Seminary, the University Library of Cambridge University, the Krauth Memorial Library of the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia, the Historical Society of Pennsylvania and the Hesburgh Library at Notre Dame. Special gratitude is offered to Edinburgh Professor John O'Neill, who has given the entire manuscript two meticulous readings, and offered numerous sagacious emendations. In my investigation of the hellenistic synagogue I was very much helped by correspondence and conversation with Shimon Applebaum, professor emeritus at the Hebrew University in Tel Aviv, whose critical comments on an early draft led to its improvement, though there are interpretations still present with which he will continue to disagree. My colleague Joseph Blenkinsopp has also given that material a critical reading with many helpful marginal

Cambridge University Press

0521891566 - From Synagogue to Church: Public Services and offices in the Earliest Christian Communities - James Tunstead Burtchaell

Frontmatter/Prelims

[More information](#)*Preface*

xvii

glosses. An editorial eye and a common interest in this early era persuaded Professor Walter Murphy of Princeton to offer other helpful emendations. I am also grateful for early encouragement in the project from Henry Chadwick, then Regius Professor of Divinity at Cambridge, Professor John Gager at Princeton, the late Professor George MacRae, S.J., from Harvard University (a dear and respected friend since our student days together), and Professor Raymond Brown, S.S., of Union Theological Seminary. Professor Peter Erb of Wilfred Laurier University generously directed me to appropriate documentation of the Pietists. I want to thank my students who have studied this material in seminars with me and whose work on those early texts has been remembered with profit: Thomas Myott, Marjorie Proctor-Smith, Sheryl Chen, Lee Klosinski, Pamela Cunningham and Paul Holland, S.J. Two student assistants have labored unstintingly over the accuracy of the footnotes: Daniel Beck and Lawrence Njoroge. My colleague, Kern Trembath, has generously read the manuscript with his usual meticulous eye, to its benefit.

Translations, if not attributed to published sources, are the work and responsibility of the author. Excerpts from *The New Jerusalem Bible*, copyright © 1985 by Darton, Longman & Todd, Ltd. and Doubleday, a division of Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc., are reprinted by permission. Excerpts from ancient classical, Jewish and Christian writers in the Loeb Classical Library are reprinted by permission of the Harvard University Press. These include Philo, *Works*, trans. Francis Henry Colson, George Herbert Whitaker and Ralph Marcus (New York: Putnam, 1929–1962); Josephus, *Works*, trans. Henry St. John Thackeray, Ralph Marcus, Allen Wikgren and Louis H. Feldman (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962–1965); *The Apostolic Fathers*, trans. Kirsopp Lake (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959). Excerpts from *Luther's Works*, trans. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955–), are reprinted by permission of Augsburg Fortress Publishers.

Leitourgia is a Greek word the early Christians used to designate that public charge expected of every Christian as a community service. To be of much public help one needed a divine empowerment, and they believed that a blessed variety of spiritual enablements prompted different members of their communities to provide for its many needs, whether bringing the sick back to their strength,

Cambridge University Press

0521891566 - From Synagogue to Church: Public Services and offices in the Earliest Christian Communities - James Tunstead Burtchaell

Frontmatter/Prelims

[More information](#)

xviii

Preface

or making sense of the scriptures, or housing travelers, or looking in a life-giving way into others' consciences. Presiding over the community and guiding and administering its decisions were some of those *leitourgiai*. They thought it took a special knack: one that was not in their gift but one which they needed to recruit when choosing their officers. This book is about those offices and that knack.

Notre Dame, Indiana
Feast of Saints Peter and Paul, 1991