

Letter 146: To Evangelus, On the Equal Dignity of Bishops and Presbyters

Jerome

Early Church (pre-Nicene) · Nicene & Post-Nicene · Letter

STROMATA 191

Downloaded from The Stromata (thestromata.com). Free for personal, educational, and ministry use.

INTRODUCTION

Jerome wrote this letter to refute an obscure but consequential claim: that deacons outrank presbyters. His counterargument runs the other direction entirely, marshaling Paul, Peter, and John to show that in the earliest church, "bishop" and "presbyter" named the same office, and that a single bishop over each congregation emerged later, as a practical remedy for schism rather than a difference in rank instituted by Christ. The letter moves briskly through scripture and custom, pausing to needle Roman practice along the way. It's a short, argumentative piece, useful for readers curious how the early church itself debated its own structures of authority before those structures hardened into settled doctrine.

Jerome refutes the opinion of those who make deacons equal to presbyters, but in doing so himself makes presbyters equal to bishops. The date of the letter is unknown.

- We read in Isaiah the words, the fool will speak folly, and I am told that some one has been mad enough to put deacons before presbyters, that is, before bishops. For when the apostle clearly teaches that presbyters are the same as bishops, must not a mere server of tables and of widows Acts 6:1-2 be insane to set himself up arrogantly over men through whose prayers the body and blood of Christ are produced? Do you ask for proof of what I say? Listen to this passage: Paul and Timotheus, the servants of Jesus Christ, to all the saints in Christ Jesus which are at Philippi with the bishops and deacons. Do you wish for another instance? In the Acts of the Apostles Paul thus speaks to the priests of a single church: Take heed unto yourselves and to all the flock, in the which the Holy Ghost has made you bishops, to feed the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. And lest any should in a spirit of contention argue that there must then have been more bishops than one in a single church, there is the following passage which clearly proves a bishop and a presbyter to be the same. Writing to Titus the apostle says: For this cause left I you in Crete, that you should set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain presbyters in every city, as I had appointed you: if any be blameless, the husband of one wife, having faithful children not accused of riot or unruly. For a bishop must be blameless as the steward of God.

Titus 1:5-7 And to Timothy he says: Neglect not the gift that is in you, which was given you by prophecy, with the laying on of the hands of the presbytery. 1 Timothy 4:14 Peter also says in his first epistle: The presbyters which are among you I exhort, who am your fellow presbyter and a witness of the sufferings of Christ and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed: feed the flock of Christ. ..taking the oversight thereof not by constraint but willingly, according unto God. In the Greek the meaning is still plainer, for the word used is *ἐπίσκοπος* / *episkopos* meaning, and this is the origin of the name overseer or bishop. But perhaps the testimony of these great men seems to you insufficient. If so, then listen to the blast of the gospel trumpet, that son of thunder, Mark 3:17 the disciple whom Jesus loved John 13:23 and who reclining on the Saviour's breast drank in the waters of sound doctrine. One of his letters begins thus: The presbyter unto the elect lady and her children whom I love in the truth; and another thus: The presbyter unto the well-beloved Gaius whom I love in the truth. When subsequently one presbyter was chosen to preside over the rest, this was done to remedy schism and to prevent each individual from rending the church of Christ by drawing it to himself. For even at Alexandria from the time of Mark the Evangelist until the episcopates of Heraclas and Dionysius the presbyters always named as bishop one of their own number chosen by themselves and set in a more exalted position, just as an army elects a general, or as deacons appoint one of themselves whom they know to be diligent and call him archdeacon. For what function, excepting ordination, belongs to a bishop that does not also belong to a presbyter? It is not the case that there is one church at Rome and another in all the world beside. Gaul and Britain, Africa and Persia, India and the East worship one Christ and observe one rule of truth. If you ask for authority, the world outweighs its capital. Wherever there is a bishop, whether it be at Rome or at Engubium, whether it be at Constantinople or at Rhegium, whether it be at Alexandria or at Zoan, his dignity is one and his priesthood is one. Neither the command of wealth nor the lowliness of poverty makes him more a bishop or less a bishop. All alike are successors of the apostles.

- But you will say, how comes it then that at Rome a presbyter is only ordained on the recommendation of a deacon? To which I reply as follows. Why do you bring forward a custom which exists in one city only? Why do you oppose to the laws of the Church a paltry exception which has given rise to arrogance and pride? The rarer anything is the more it is sought after. In India pennyroyal is more costly than pepper. Their fewness makes deacons persons of consequence while presbyters are less thought of owing to their great numbers. But even in the church of Rome the deacons stand while the presbyters seat themselves, although bad habits have by degrees so far crept in that I have seen a deacon, in the absence of the bishop, seat himself among the presbyters and at social gatherings give his blessing to them. Those who act thus must learn that they are wrong and must give heed to the apostles words: it is not reason that we should leave the word of God and serve tables. Acts 6:2 They must consider the reasons which led to the appointment of deacons at the beginning. They must read the Acts of the Apostles and bear in mind their true position.

Of the names presbyter and bishop the first denotes age, the second rank. In writing both to Titus and to Timothy the apostle speaks of the ordination of bishops and of deacons, but says not a word of the ordination of presbyters; for the fact is that the word bishops includes presbyters also. Again when a man is promoted it is from a lower place to a higher. Either then a presbyter should be ordained a

deacon, from the lesser office, that is, to the more important, to prove that a presbyter is inferior to a deacon; or if on the other hand it is the deacon that is ordained presbyter, this latter should recognize that, although he may be less highly paid than a deacon, he is superior to him in virtue of his priesthood. In fact as if to tell us that the traditions handed down by the apostles were taken by them from the old testament, bishops, presbyters and deacons occupy in the church the same positions as those which were occupied by Aaron, his sons, and the Levites in the temple.

Source: Translated by W.H. Fremantle, G. Lewis, and W.G. Martley. From *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series*, Vol. 6, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1893).

Text supplied by Keith Mason from a personal archive folder (Google Drive), previously prepared for an earlier version of *The Stromata*. Accessed July 2026.

Translation: Author died 420. Standard NPNF translation, public domain; confirmed via explicit source colophon.

<https://www.thestromata.com/texts/letter-146-evangelus-jerome>