

Healthy church 7: Church government

Introduction...

Church government has to do with leadership and decision making in the church. As a topic, it's a bit like the engine of a car. It's not something that most Christians think very much about, until it breaks down.

The Lord has a lot to say about this in the Bible. He is glorified as we understand and obey what he says. And the church is blessed: for, the exercise of Biblical authority is a crucial means of growing the effectiveness and the unity of a church.

1. New Testament passages on church government

Having PRAYED we're going to READ several passages which speak to the question of church government:

Mark 10:42-45, "And Jesus called them to him and said to them, "You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. ⁴³ But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴ and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. ⁴⁵ For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

John 13:14-16, "If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. ¹⁵ For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. ¹⁶ Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him."

Acts 14:23, "And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed."

Acts 20:17-38, "Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him. ¹⁸ And when they came to him, he said to them: "You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, ¹⁹ serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews; ²⁰ how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house, ²¹ testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. ²² And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, ²³ except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me. ²⁴ But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. ²⁵ And now, behold, I know that none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face again. ²⁶ Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, ²⁷ for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God. ²⁸ Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. ²⁹ I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; ³⁰ and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. ³¹ Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears. ³² And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified. ³³ I coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. ³⁴ You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me. ³⁵ In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to

receive."³⁶ And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all.³⁷ And there was much weeping on the part of all; they embraced Paul and kissed him,³⁸ being sorrowful most of all because of the word he had spoken, that they would not see his face again. And they accompanied him to the ship."

Ephesians 4:11-12, "And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers,¹² to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ..."

I Thessalonians 5:12-13, "Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you. Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other."

1 Timothy 3:1-13, "The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task.² Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach,³ not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money.⁴ He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive,⁵ for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church?⁶ He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil.⁷ Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.⁸ Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain.⁹ They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience.¹⁰ And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless.¹¹ Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things.¹² Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well.¹³ For those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus."

1 Timothy 5:17-18, "Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.¹⁸ For the Scripture says, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain," and, "The laborer deserves his wages.""

2 Timothy 1:13-14, 2:1-2, "Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.¹⁴ By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you... You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus,² and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also. "

Titus 1:5-9, "This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you--⁶ if anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination.⁷ For an overseer, as God's steward, must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain,⁸ but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined.⁹ He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it."

1 Peter 5:1-5, "So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed:² shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly;³ not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.⁴ And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.⁵ Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.""

Hebrews 13:7, 17, "Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith... Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you."

So, having read those Scriptures, what does the Bible say church government and how it contributes to a healthy church?

2. The church is governed by elders

(a) Key terms: elder = overseer = pastor-teacher

The NT uses three words to describe those charged with leading the church:

- “elder” (Greek: *presbuteros*)
- “overseer” (*episkopos*)
- “pastor” or “pastor-teacher” (*poimen / poimen kai didaskalos*)

Those three words are used interchangeably for the same person. They have slightly different connotations. But it’s biblical to think of the local church leader simultaneously as being elder, overseer and pastor.

In the New Testament, the Bishop is not a radically different figure to the local church pastor. Certainly, the N.T. knows nothing of “monarchical” bishops – powerful individuals standing above the local church who wield a largely unchallenged rule.

(b) Elders: plural and local

Church leadership is to be plural: “elders”. There’s no place in Christ’s church for a one-man dictatorship. The elder or bishop is not a king, and should not behave like an absolute monarch.

One huge advantage of plural elders is that it enables them to know the congregation better. It’s one reason why, prayerfully, we hope to increase the number of elders.

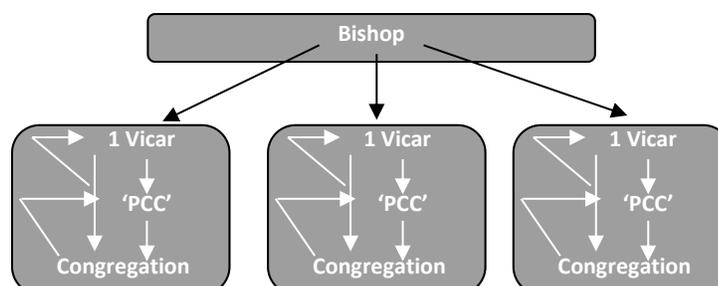
Leadership is primarily local. There are to be “elders in every town” in Crete (Titus 1:5), and in “every church” planted as the gospel grew (Acts 14:23). We’ll say something shortly about the relationship between churches. But the bottom line is that each local church has her own elders.

(c) The relationship between elders, congregation and denomination

Over the centuries, different traditions have sought to arrange relationships between elders, congregation and denomination in a variety of ways. I’m briefly going to outline them:

• **Episcopal church government**

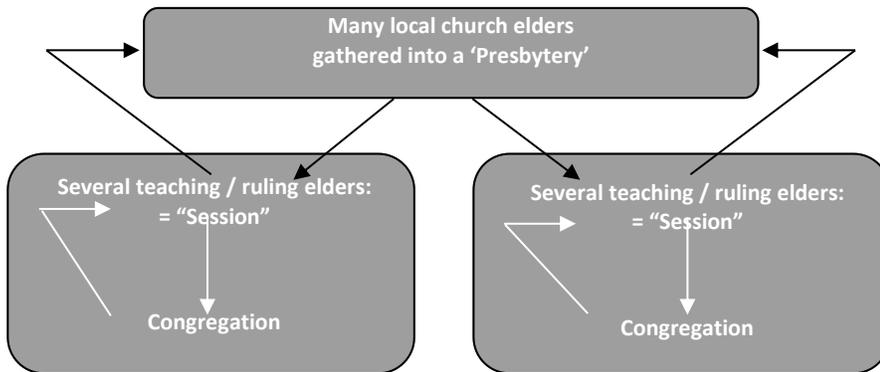
One pastor (usually termed “vicar”) leads a congregation. A lay committee – the Parochial Church Council – will help in this. The congregation elects the church council. The vicar is appointed by a combination of Bishop, church council representatives, and sometimes another external body. The Bishop – who oversees multiple congregations and is regarded as co-pastor in each – usually has the greatest influence. A series of synods at local, regional and national level provide a forum for discussion and sometimes decision making.



- **Presbyterian church government**

Authority is vested significantly in the *presbyters* or elders of the church. Each local church will have a mix of teaching elders (usually the full-time pastors) and ruling elders (ordained laymen). Together they form the church’s “Session” (from the Latin word to “sit”). Local churches send elders to the regional Presbytery which rules on matters of doctrine and order that affect the whole denomination.

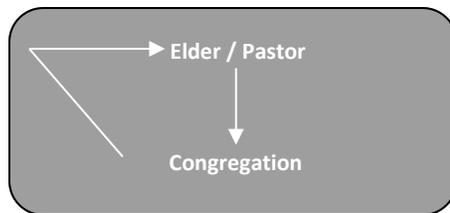
Generally, teaching elders are appointed by Presbytery (following consultation); generally, ruling elders are appointed within the church (by the session, and by congregational vote).



- **Independent churches: congregationally governed or elder led**

Independent churches believe that the sole authority for the government of the local church resides *within* that local church. There is no external authority or involvement.

In the U.K. most independent churches are congregationally governed. That means, congregations not only vote to appoint their pastor and/or elders, but also vote regularly to approve decisions in the life of the congregation. (It’s a little like direct democracy with its regular referenda, as opposed to representative democracy with periodic elections).



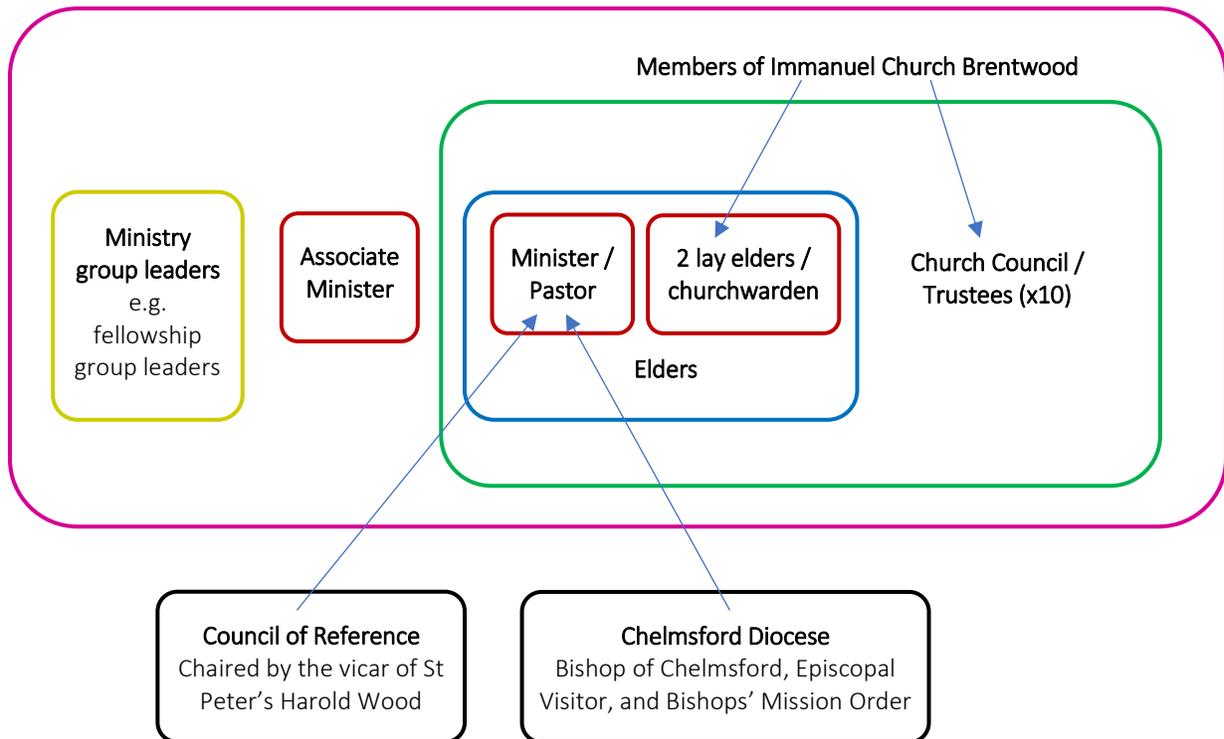
There are, though, some independent churches that are not strictly congregationally governed, but are “elder led.” In some, the congregation will appoint those elders. In others, the elder body takes responsibility for choosing new elders.

I’m not going to evaluate these three forms of church government at this point. You’ll find very fine conservative evangelical or Reformed churches within each category.

Equally, it’s possible for any church to go wrong (although, arguably, some forms of government reduce that likelihood somewhat).

- **Church government at Immanuel**

Church government at Immanuel currently resembles something of a hybrid of the Episcopal/Anglican model.



In the remainder of our time together I want us to examine what an elder/overseer/pastor-teacher is to be like – and how it is that their life and teaching should work for the health of the local church.

In short: they need to be gripped by the Word, and have a firm group upon the Word. Or to put it another way: they need to *live the truth* and they need to *know the truth*.

3. Church elders must LIVE the truth

From Titus chapter 1 let's see how the life of the church leader must be impacted by the word.

Why? Titus 1:7, "For an overseer as God's steward...". The church elder is looking after things that belong to someone else: the truth of the Gospel, and the people of Christ's church. He is a steward.

So, his life had better match up. The key message of Titus is that the "knowledge of the truth... accords with godliness." There's a critical correspondence between truth and life.

And this "life" is then sketched out in vv6-8. This list includes attitudes as well as actions, positives as well as negatives, the elders' whole family and not just him as an individual.

Church elders and other leaders need these verses. Actually, the whole church needs to know the kind of people you should be praying for, if we want to be a church that grows in godliness in a very godless world. Someone who is...

- “above reproach”. Paul says that twice – in v6 and in v7. That does not mean “sinless perfection.” But it does mean not open to a justified attack or criticism. And the next few verses show us the kind of areas which Paul has in mind.
- “husband of one wife.” His personal life is not open to the charge of sexual immorality. If he is married the elder or overseer is to be a model of sexual morality and faithfulness. (We have to say of the Church of England that its failure to maintain Biblical standards for those in leadership is one of its most wicked derelictions of duty. Ungodly leaders lead churches into immorality and destruction).
- “his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination.” In view here are children who are under the direct influence of their father – presumably younger and still under the family roof. And those children are walking in the way of the Lord. What excludes someone here? Not the odd bit of disobedience. But deep-seated rebellion or immorality.
- “not arrogant”. No pride.
- “not quick tempered.” No anger.
- “not a drunkard.” Not gripped by the control of alcohol.
- “not violent.” Not an angry or bullying character, given to violent words or actions. But gentle.
- “not greedy for gain.” Not in it for the money, or the kudos, or pats on the back.
- “hospitable.” An open home, where fellow sheep are welcomed and loved.
- “a lover of good.” That’s a big deal in Titus (2:14, 3:8, 3:14).
- “self-controlled.” Self-mastery means not being controlled by any of these vices. And, again, self-control is a repeated theme in Titus (Titus 2:5, 2:6, 2:12).
- “upright” and “holy” and “disciplined”.

Some applications:

If you have been repulsed by the immorality of a Christian leader (either in the press or in person) you are right to be. God is repulsed too. This is not what he wants of the leaders of his church. Private or public hypocrisy is a scandal that hurts the body of Christ and brings Jesus’ name into disrepute.

So, please pray for the elders and other leaders of Immanuel: for our personal lives, characters, and families. We are normal human beings, and normal Christians too.

But, by the grace of God and by the power of the Holy Spirit, God can use the lives of Christian people and Christian leaders to do good. He calls us to be godly examples to copy. Those of us leading the church need to remember that weighty charge.

That, in turn, sets a challenge for all of us. A passage like Titus 1 is specifically describing the life of an elder. However, it’s not describing a super-Christian. It’s describing normal and consistent godliness. How do you line up against this? What about your own life, family, consistency? Is there a problem you need to share and to pray about?

4. Church elders must KNOW the truth

God's word has a grip on him. And he must have firm grip upon God's Word. We see that in Titus 1:9, "He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it."

Elders are to be orthodox. They need to understand the deep truths of the faith themselves. A depth of understanding, of training, of reading is necessary if they are to be trustworthy.

Also implied is a depth of conviction and courage such that they will hold fast to that message, as it has been taught, regardless of the consequences. The apostolic gospel is a like the baton in a relay race, to be passed on and not dropped. In matters of doctrine and Bible the church elder is to be conservative, not an innovator. We are called to teach the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

This is the "sound doctrine" of which we thought in our previous session – truth which is "healthy", which will lead a church into Christlikeness, and which is the opposite of teaching which is false and poisonous.

Very simply, at the heart of pastoral ministry the church elder is to teach the truth – and to refute error. We see that repeatedly in Titus – 2:1,2,3,6,9,15, 3:1,8.

Some applications:

Church elders don't need to be funny or entertaining or mega-clever. But they do need to have a deep grip on the things of the faith, coupled with an ability to teach and a willingness where necessary to correct and to refute.

Bible teaching ministry is what God has chosen to do the "heavy-lifting" of building His church. And that includes stating positive truth, but also that which is negative and refuting of error.

If a church member starts to go astray in doctrine, then it is the job of the elder – with patience, with prayer, and with teaching – to bring them back.

If a church member starts to go astray in life or godliness, then it is the job of the elders – with patience, with prayer and with teaching – to bring them back.

That's why Hebrews 13:17 says what it does: "Obey your leaders – literally, "be persuaded" by your leaders – and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you."

If a team of elders is trustworthy (not perfect, but basically trustworthy), then Scripture's expectation is that they're to be trusted – and followed – in their leading, teaching *and* refuting.

(Proverbs 9:8 is a helpful encouragement to receive godly challenge: “Do not reprove a scoffer, or he will hate you; reprove a wise man, and he will love you.”)

Now, lots of people—particularly in our generation—are uncomfortable with the idea of authority anywhere—not to mention in a church. Authority can be abused. It can be sinfully misdirected. But God invented authority. It’s for our good as a church. And it’s also for the good of members individually, because learning to trust authority is good for us spiritually. In the church, when elders’ authority is used with the consent of the congregation for the good of the congregation, the congregation will benefit as God builds his church.

Now, does this mean that an elder can tell you to purchase a blue car rather than a red one? No. Elders have the authority to lead the congregation by teaching and applying the word of God. Beyond the word of God, there is liberty of conscience.

As church members, we’re called to submit; but the other side of that is that church elders are called to exercise their authority rightly – not like Gentile lords, but as humble and Christ-like servants.

I’m always so grateful for the prayers of the church family; for gracious forbearance when I get things wrong; for patient questions when folk don’t understand or disagree; and above all for the sense that we are together collaborating for one another’s spiritual good.

Top book recommendation: “Church elders”, by Jeramie Rinne

Appendix: the portrait of the pastor-teacher from John Bunyan’s *Pilgrims Progress*

Interpreter. Then said the Interpreter, Come in, I will shew thee that which will be profitable to thee. So he commanded his man to light the Candle, and bid Christian follow him, so he had him into a private room, and bid his man open a door; the which when he had done, Christian saw the Picture of a very grave Person hang up against the wall; and this was the fashion of it.

It had eyes lifted up to Heaven, the best of Books in his hand, the Law of Truth was written upon his lips, the World was behind his back. It stood as if it pleaded with men, and a Crown of Gold did hang over his head.

Christian. Then said Christian, What means this?

Interpreter. The Man whose Picture this is, is one of a thousand; he can beget children, travel in birth with children, and nurse them himself when they are born. And whereas thou seest him with his eyes lift up to Heaven, the best of Books in his hand, and the Law of Truth writ on his lips, it is to shew thee that his work is to know and unfold dark things to sinners; even as also thou seest him stand as if he pleaded with men; and whereas thou seest the World as cast behind him, and that a Crown hangs over his head, that is to shew thee that slighting and despising the things that are present, for the love that he hath to his Master's service, he is sure in the world that comes next to have Glory for his reward.

Now, said the Interpreter, I have shewed thee this Picture first, because the Man whose Picture this is, is the only man whom the Lord of the place whither thou art going, hath authorized to be thy guide in all difficult places thou mayest with in the way; wherefore take good heed to what I have shewed thee, and bear well in thy mind what thou hast seen, lest in thy Journey thou meet with some that pretend to lead thee right, but their way goes down to death.