

Church government: Biblical principles and their practical outworking

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.

However, 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

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..."

1 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."

2. The foundation of biblical church government: under Christ, the church is governed by elders

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

Jesus is the head of the church. He tells us how it is to be governed. As the Westminster Confession of Faith puts it (30.1): “The Lord Jesus, as King and Head of his church, has appointed a government in it, to be administered by church officers...”

The New Testament uses three words to describe those officers who are charged with leading the church:

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

Those three words are used interchangeably for the same person. (Note how all three are used in Acts 20:17,28 to describe the same people. The English “care” in v28 is actually “shepherd”). They have slightly different connotations. But it’s biblical to think of the local church leader simultaneously as being elder, overseer and pastor.

Clearly, the most important thing about a church’s elders is that they are men who are gripped by the gospel (they are godly) and who themselves have a firm grip upon the Gospel (they have a deep grasp of Bible and doctrine, and ability to teach it).

From 1 Timothy 5:17 we understand that some elders are given especially to preaching and teaching (“teaching elders”); others are apt to teach but serve mainly by sharing in leadership (“ruling elders” or “governing elders”).

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

One huge advantage of plural elders is that it enables them to know the congregation better. It’s one reason why, prayerfully, we continue to seek a growing number of elders at Immanuel.

Leadership is primarily local. There are to be “elders in every town” in Crete (Titus 1:5), and in “every church” (Acts 14:23).

(c) External oversight and accountability

It is our conviction that the Bible does not encourage local churches to be wholly independent of one another. There’s a fuller discussion of this point below. For now, simply notice how groups of congregations are described as one “church” (e.g. Acts 9:31) and how elders from many churches collaborate to pass a judgement that effects them all (see Acts 15). Notice too how we’re encouraged towards unity rather than isolation both by the Old Testament (there is one people of God, one OT church) and by the NT (e.g. specific commands to unity and to deep partnerships).

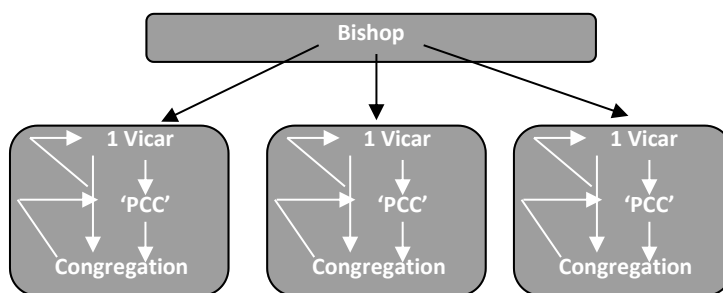
Immanuel is governed by our own church’s Elders, plus an external Council of Reference formed from Elders of other local churches. We’re not currently in a denomination. But this structure most resembles the traditional Presbyterian model (with a small “p” – presbyter being the Bible’s word for an “elder”).

3. Different models of church government

Over the centuries different traditions have approached church government in different ways – in particular the relationship and roles of elders, congregations and denominations. Here we survey the three main alternatives: Anglican, Independent and Presbyterian.

(a) Government in Anglican churches

One pastor (usually termed “vicar”) leads a congregation. A lay committee – the Church Council – will help in this, with a particular role given to “churchwardens.” 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 – has significant authority in the appointment process and in the life of the church. Within the last 50 years it has become common for a series of synods at local, regional and national level to provide a forum for discussion and sometimes decision making (although “synodical” government is actually not a feature of historic Anglicanism).



Historically this has tended to create a hierarchical structure both within the denomination (the bishop wields considerable authority), and also within the local church (the vicar exercises spiritual oversight and local authority, with churchwardens discharging some legal and otherwise practical responsibilities and limited spiritual oversight).

However, it’s clear that many Anglican churches are now wanting to be more consciously Reformed (or simply in-step with the Bible’s vision for local church leadership) and thus are changing the names and roles of senior lay leaders (churchwarden to elder – much as we have done).

The Anglican tradition does have an understanding of “deacons” within the local church. However, it is a pattern quite different to that in most non-conformist churches. Where the latter would view deacons as practical servants of the church, Anglicanism (mainly) views ordained ministers in their first phase of ministry as “deacons” who will subsequently be ordained again as “presbyters.” Whilst there are a very few “permanent deacons” this role is also a kind of “junior pastor” rather than practical servant of the church.

The most distinctive feature of Anglican polity is the office and significance of a Bishop. Local churches are connected together by and both authority and accountability exercised via the person of the Bishop.

In a well-functioning episcopal church a bishop will serve congregations through biblical teaching, prayerfulness, the sharing of ministry wisdom, active relational care, and by serving as the “gate-keeper” to ordained ministry.

Because there tends to be a poor bishop-to-church ratio the individual is usually relatively unknown to church members.

Scriptural foundation for episcopacy is drawn from the example of Titus (see Titus 1:5). Whilst the term “episkopos” is used in the NT of local church elders and pastor-teachers (and is interchangeable with them),

it is said that Titus was a non-apostolic figure (and thus to be imitated in a way that the apostles often are not) who was tasked with appointing elders to churches across a whole region.

One other significant justification for the practice of episcopal government lies in the Anglican application of the normative principle. Simply put, the Bible doesn't say you *shouldn't* give authority to an individual in this way, so it is a perfectly legitimate role if it tends to the edification of the church it. (See below on Normative and Regulative principles).

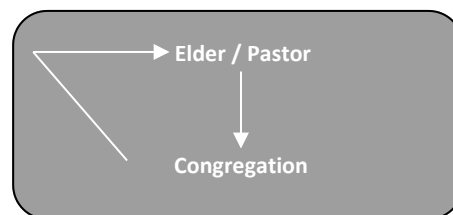
It is a fact of history that much/most of the global church has followed this sort of pattern.

(b) Government in Independent churches

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.

Thus, each church appoints its own leaders, guards its own membership, disciplines its own rebels and determines its own polity and rule. Each may have quite different approaches to leadership, membership, discipline and government. It's hard to make broad generalisations.

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. (Within U.K. independency elder-led churches are in the minority – the vast majority are congregationally governed).

Scriptural foundations for Independency are found in the primacy given to the local church in the NT, and in the disciplinary power which appears to reside solely in the local church (Matthew 18:15-20, 1 Cor. 5:1-5, Rev. 2-3).

On this basis Titus 1:5 is said to describe the external appointment of a “start-up” pastor; thereafter leaders are appointed internally. Also, the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 is regarded as a “one-off” connected with the admission of the Gentiles, and not the basis of an enduring pattern as Presbyterians argue.

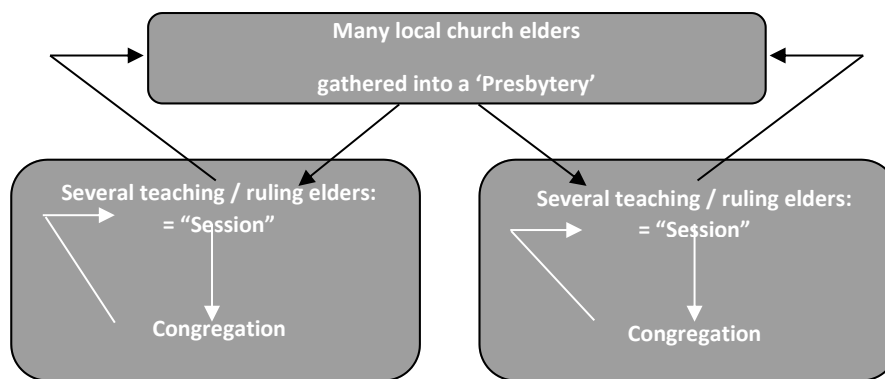
There is, though, an acknowledgement that the NT encourages the local church towards partnership and connectionalism – e.g. in Acts 18:27 and 11:29.

(c) Government in Presbyterian churches

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. Usually Presbyterians will gather together in a larger Synod.

Generally, teaching elders are appointed by Presbytery (following consultation); generally, ruling elders are

appointed within the church (by the session, and by congregational vote).



English Presbyterian polity has its formal origins in the Puritan era. Anglican (and then ex-Anglican) ministers wanted to pursue a more Reformed pattern of church government (as well as other changes), as had been achieved in many places on the continent. This was resisted by Queen Elizabeth I, only formally achieved in the Civil War and Commonwealth era, and then subjected to official persecution in 1662.

Specific scriptural foundations for Presbyterian polity are found in the unity of the regional church in Acts (see general discussion below on denominations), in the authoritative decision of multiple elders in the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15, and in the preaching/ruling distinction in 1 Timothy 5:17.

Presbyterian churches usually have an understanding of a deacon more obviously in accord both with scripture and other non-conformist traditions.

The presbytery functions as a court – it has a kind-of legal role: here new elders are examined and selected; problems are discussed and ruled on; church members can bring concerns and ideas for consideration. It is also a catalyst for ministry both formally (through shared initiatives – e.g. church planting) and informally (as local leaders meet and encourage each other).

Presbyterianism has an expectation that the Bible regulates or shapes the church very directly (particularly in gathered worship, doctrine and church government). They adhere to the “regulative principle” (see below). Anglicanism, in contrast, tends to be more pragmatic.

Our pattern of church government at Immanuel most resembles that of traditional Presbyterianism. The following sections help explain – from the Bible – why this is the case.

4. An underlying question: does the Bible teach independency or denomination?

The approaches/groups surveyed above answer this question in different ways. Arguably, you *can* fit both independency and denomination within Biblical parameters; i.e. there are biblical ways of doing both.

That said, every local church DOES have to make up its mind (you can’t for the sake either of indecision or charity decide to be an “episcopalian-presbyterian-independent church”!). And it is our conviction that a local church ought to have some kind of external authority (specifically, one that resembles the Presbyterian model) because this *best* reflects the teaching of the Bible. Here is the Biblical basis for that conclusion.

When you ask the New Testament “what is church?” its primary answer is “the *local* gathering of faithful people where the Word of God is preached, the sacraments administered according to Christ’s institution, and where discipline is faithfully exercised.” The local church does have primacy. It’s the earthly expression of the great universal church to which we are all admitted at the moment of our conversion. It’s the place

where the Gospel is taught (in Bible-teaching and believing) and where the gospel is revealed (in relationships). However, that does not exhaust the Bible's teaching on the subject. According to the New Testament...

(a) Groups of congregations can also be described as a "Church"

We see this most clearly in the book of Acts. There were many, many different local churches throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria in the early days of the Gospel. Yet, Acts 9:31 can describe them as "the church" – singular.

Acts 9:31, "So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied."

There is a unity and a partnership between the congregations in this large region which meant that these churches could also be described collectively as "the Church."

Similarly, in Jerusalem there were many thousands of Christian believers. (Acts tells us that explicitly – see 4:4, 5:14, 21:20). We're pretty sure that they didn't meet in a single mega-church, but in houses with little teams of elders governing each. Yet, Acts 8:1 speaks in the singular of *the* "church in Jerusalem."

Acts 8:1, "And Saul approved of his execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles."

In the light of these New Testament passages it is simply a "fact" that local churches within a region who choose to bind themselves together are properly described as a "church." According to the N.T. a denomination *is* a church, with spiritual as well as practical connections and relationships. That doesn't exactly settle the question of whether you *ought* to pursue Presbyterian government, but I believe it does point towards the biblical propriety of denominations.

(b) In Acts 15 elders from many churches pass a judgement

The events surrounding what's often called the Jerusalem Council arguably point us towards Presbyterian polity. There was a crisis in the church in Antioch, so the church there sent a representative group to Jerusalem for help (15:1-3). They were welcomed there by "the church" (verse 3).

There then gathered together "apostles and [church] elders," a phrase which is repeated 5 times in the chapter and which describes the leaders of a variety of churches who had authority to adjudicate together on this question (verses 2, 6).

This Council then delivered a "judgement" (verse 19), in which the apostles and elders made an authoritative decision (verses 23ff). They didn't say that it was up to the local churches to deal with the issue as each saw fit. Rather, judgement was given – and was received with joy (verse 31) rather than with resistance.

Is Acts 15 to be read as "one-off" or (in some ways) typical? That's a judgement call, and has to do with the question of deriving ongoing patterns from a narrative text like Acts. Arguably, it would be odd if the *existence* of "elders" in local churches is generally held to be ongoing (e.g. what we read of in 14:23), while the recorded *activity* of such elders in Acts 15 is not.

(c) The Bible speaks of a "council of elders"

The NT Greek word for "elder" is the masculine noun, *presbuteros*; it describes an individual elder though is also sometimes used in the plural form to describe a body of elders.

There is also a neuter noun, *presbuterion*, which is used (in its grammatically singular form) to describe that same group. Thus we read:

1 Timothy 4:14, "Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophecy when the council of elders [the *presbuterion*] laid their hands on you."

At very least this word reinforces the plural nature of church leadership (i.e. there are some things that the *presbuterion* as a body must do).

But does it say anything about where those elders are drawn from? Are they from one church, or from several? Is it argument for or against a Presbytery, or does it have no bearing on the matter? There's not much in the immediate context of 1 Timothy to help answer those questions. But there is some OT background that may be helpful in defining these terms.

- The church's *presbuterion* (and its individual *presbuteroi*) has some kind of connection to the body of elders which helped lead OT Israel. This council was still in existence in apostolic times and is described by the same word (see Luke 22:66, Acts 22:5).
- The Greek Septuagint translation of the OT (translated from the Hebrew in around 200BC for the use of Greek-speaking Jews and often quoted by the apostles) frequently uses these terms to describe a group of individuals who were appointed to some kind of national and representative function.
- Significantly, these men may have been parallel to the "heads" of the 12 tribes, or may even themselves have been the heads of the different tribes (e.g. Joshua 24:1, 1 Kings 8:1) who gathered together from time-to-time.

This is not a "clincher" of an argument, but it does suggest that the presbytery was not "new" to the New Testament any more than was the "church" (*ekklesia* – same word in the Greek O.T.), again suggesting some level of continuity between the people of God in old covenant and new covenant times.

(d) An argument from Biblical wisdom

Many would also judge that, given the Bible's teaching about church *and* about human sinfulness, it is *wise* that local churches should bind themselves together in denominational relationships. All churches can fail. But arguably there is wisdom in collaborating on matters such as disputes over doctrine and discipline, and in the selection, appointment and removal of elders. (Generally speaking many counsellors are better than one, Proverbs 15:22). If you're by conviction an Independent you probably won't find this point convincing. But if you are by conviction an Anglican or Presbyterian you'll see it as reinforcing a denominational framework and the goodness of external authority.

(e) An argument from the unity of the church

The following point would also be unconvincing to most Independents, but would offer additional confirmation to others that a denomination is Biblical. There is only *one* church of Jesus Christ, of which individual churches are miniature "models." Thus, anything which expresses that unity and which works against individualism and isolationism is healthy and appropriate.

Similarly, notice the way in which the NT speaks of "partnership" between churches and Christians. It is highly relational, loving, purposeful, committed, energetic and sacrificial collaboration for the Gospel – and is expressed in love, financial giving, church planting, practical support, and prayer (see Philippians 1:5, 1:7, 2:1, 3:10, 4:14; Romans 15:22-33). This does not automatically mean "denomination." But arguably there are times when it is hard fully to obey these texts without a denominational framework (e.g. tight accountability which means you can give super-generously, knowing that you're not throwing money or people away).

5. An underlying question: regulative or normative principle – what is your expectation of Scripture?

In working out the Bible's parameters for healthy church government there are two underlying and (apparently) contrasting approaches. These have been summed up as the "regulative" and the "normative" principles. Presbyterians and most Reformed Baptists favour the former. Anglicans and Lutherans are among those who favour the latter. Here's a very basic summary of each position, followed by a confessional illustration from the Westminster Confession of Faith (RP) and the 39 Articles (NP), and then some Scriptural justification:

(a) Regulative principle

Summary: You only believe or do what the Bible positively states (especially in matters of doctrine and worship).

Thus, WCF 20.2 states that “God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are, in anything, contrary to his Word; or *beside it, if matters of faith, or worship...*” Not only are we to avoid that which is against God’s Word – but we must avoid all that is offered to supplement God’s Word.

WCF 21.1 adds that acceptable worship is only that which the Lord has himself instituted and has “limited” by the Bible; we are not free to worship in “any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scripture.”

Scriptural justification for the RP is found in our foundational obligation to heed God not man (e.g. Romans 14:4, Acts 5:29), in the general command and expectation that we will constantly turn “to the law and to the testimony” (Isa. 8:20), in the Bible’s warnings against human doctrines and false worship (e.g. Matt. 15:9, Isa. 29:13), and in the care God takes in his word not only to reveal Himself but also how He is to be approached. This last point is illustrated in Exodus 20 by the first two commandments: where commandment one rules out the worship of other gods, commandment two tells us *how* we should worship the one true God – with no graven images.

(b) Normative principle

Summary: You may believe or do whatever the Bible does not forbid.

Thus Article XX of the Anglican 39 Articles of Religion states that “The Church hath power to decree Rites or Ceremonies, and authority- in Controversies of Faith: And yet it is not lawful for the Church to ordain any thing that is contrary to God's Word written...” In other words, the church possesses authority to decree certain things, so long as they are not expressly opposed by the Bible.

Scriptural justification for the NP is slightly different to the RP position. It holds that God has provided clear instructions for some areas of church life, but has left others more open and flexible. In these areas we have freedom to use human judgement as is appropriate to different cultures and contexts. Thus, Reformed Anglicans today don’t believe that God has prescribed only one form of governance for his church, and they employ “Bishops” in part simply because they think they “work.” Historically not all Anglicans have been so modest in their claims – some *have* assumed that the Anglican way is clearly the best.

(c) Some observations and evaluations:

What are some pros and cons of the RP?

- It works very hard to justify all that we do from what the Bible actually teaches, be it explicitly or by good and necessary implication. This is a good instinct and practice.
- This is not merely academic. As Jonathan Leeman points out “if the believer *needs* a church in order to be formally recognized as a Christian, then the church had better darn well make sure it does not force anything onto a Christian that the Bible and the gospel do not require.” (See his helpful article here <https://www.9marks.org/article/journalregulative-jazz/>). There is actually a freedom in the RP (perhaps counter-intuitively) – specifically a freedom from things that might hurt our consciences.
- RP churches can become very inflexible, bound by tradition (rather ironically!), and defined negatively (e.g. “Our church worships in the way that pleases God because we don’t do x, y and z”).
- The RP tradition has spilt a great deal of ink on working out what are the “elements” or “substance” of Scriptural worship (for which we require explicit Bible commands) and what are the “accidents” or “circumstances” (where common sense and human judgement do cut in). Some would say this debate has not always been fruitful, although *any* church that believes in the sufficiency and authority of Scripture will always have this sort of conversation even if the terms they use are different.

What are some pros and cons of the NP?

- It doesn't follow that all Anglican and Lutheran churches are complete dens of heresy and idolatrous worship! In practice, there is very little difference between a *conservative* application of the normative principle and a *flexible* application of the regulative principle. They come extremely close together.
- That said, if you want *one* foundational reason why Anglicanism has *always* been broader than other Reformed traditions you will find it here. The NP can play into the hands of our sinful subjectivism and personal tastes. ("Personally I like and Scripture doesn't really forbid dramas... smoke machines... monarchical bishops... candles... incense... statues of Mary and the saints... civil partnerships... etc.")

Certainly, we need to be careful in charging others with being too legalistic (if we're NP people) or too loose (if we're RP people).

And clearly there is legitimate room for variation in the *application* of Biblical principles. But it is our judgement that the RP is the more Biblical basis on which to proceed, and – if pursued in the right spirit – should actually allow for that proper flexibility in application.