

Apostles first or first apostles?

And God has appointed these in the church: first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, varieties of tongues. **1 Cor 12:28**

Introduction

If ever a verse was misconstrued this is it.

What Paul says here has been hijacked by the Charismatic Movement, and especially the radical arm of it, to prove that the churches are dominated by single individuals called apostles who rule with divine authority over hundreds of churches and thousands of people single-handedly.

We know that this interpretation is wrong because Paul everywhere teaches (as well as Peter and John) the following:

- The local church is small (it meets in homes; N.B. Jesus' 'little flock').
- The local church meets in a house and nowhere else (Rm 16:5; 1 Cor 16:19; Col 4:15; Philem 1:2).
- The local church is led by a small team of equal elders (Phil 1:1).¹
- There is no authority above the elders (Acts 20:17, 28; 1 Tim 3: 2, 5; Titus 1:5, 7).
- There is no such thing as denominations or church groupings under a single leader.
- We are warned that no man must dominate the church single-handedly (1 Pt 5:2-3).
- Men that sought authority and power over others were condemned by the apostles (3 Jn 1:9-11).
- Decision-making was by consensus (Acts 15:22).
- Submission in the church is not to an apostle but to everyone; however eldership should be honoured (1 Tim 5:17; 1 Pt 5:5).

What I seek to do in this paper is explain what this verse really means and give some basic facts about apostleship. It is not an extensive analysis and exposition of the whole subject.

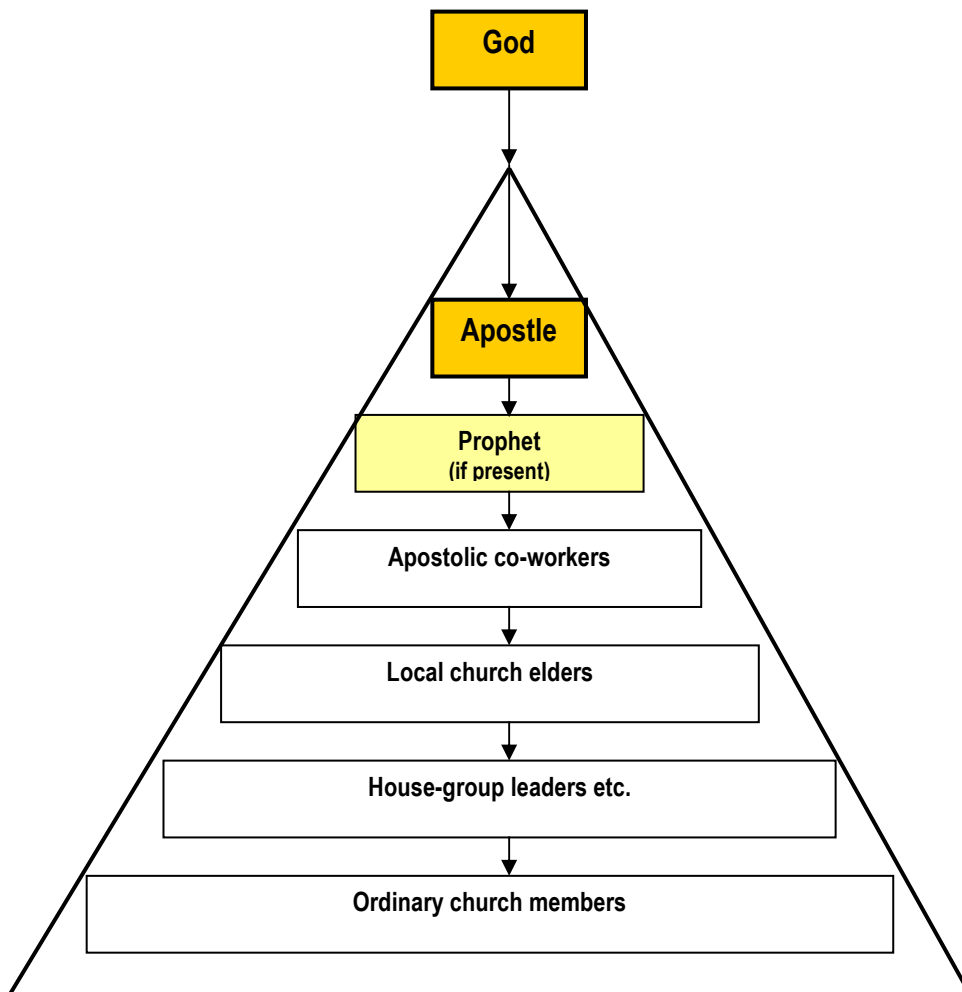
¹ Deacons have no spiritual authority but serve the church as administrators to care for the poor and needy under the elders.

The modern Charismatic situation

Charismatic apostles that rule over many churches are not NT apostles; indeed the true term for such an office is archbishop. Any office that rules over multiple churches and local leaders (bishops) is an archbishop [in UK Anglican terminology; other churches have different names such as: cardinal (Roman Catholicism), superintendent (Methodism) or patriarch (Orthodox)].

Charismatics have just stolen Anglican hierarchy, created new denominations and then added NT titles to make it seem authentic. It is just another cult based upon men worship.²

This is the pattern of Charismatic apostolic church structures.



Different churches have different variations of these steps but the key issue is that apostles are first in authority. 1 Cor 12:28 is used to defend this primacy, which is claimed to be 'prima inter pares'³ but in reality is a totalitarian despotism. In fact, this model of authority stems from demonic hierarchy and is common in the world (the military, commerce, despotic government etc.; see appendix).

² In fact most UK Charismatic churches under apostles are low-church Episcopalians with added pagan mysticism and eastern occultism.

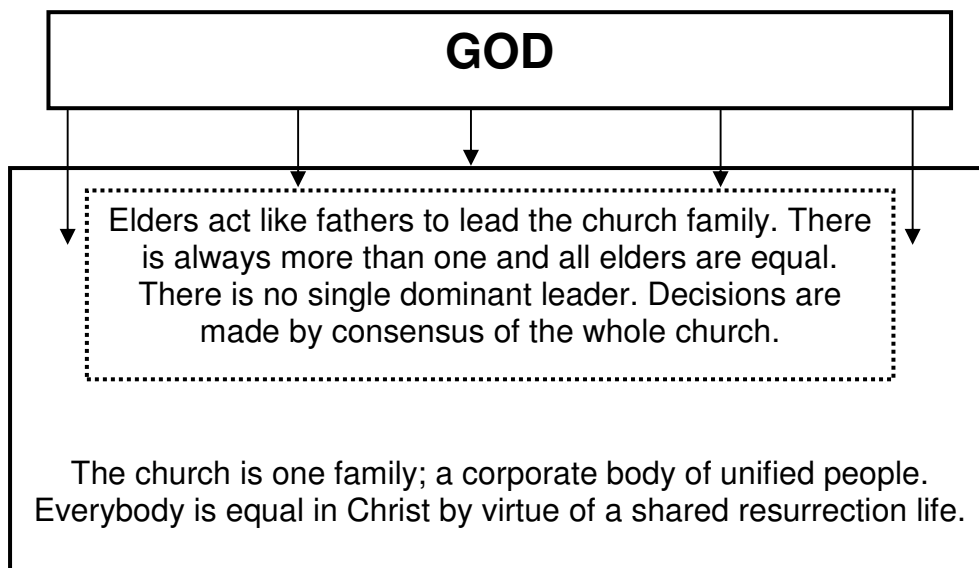
³ First among equals. As George Orwell pointed out in *Animal Farm*, this claim always leads to some being more equal than others.

In the worst scenarios the apostle is deemed to hear from God directly the strategies for the church and then passes them down the line and ordinary members are expected to obey come what may. This is nothing but blasphemy since the apostle is taking the place of Christ as the mediator between God and man.

Charismatics tell us that, *[apostles] are first in authority*.⁴ What followed this emphasis in the UK Restoration Movement was a further emphasis upon submission to apostles. This led to what was known as the Shepherding Movement where church leaders dominated people's lives: *'every Christian must ... learn to submit'*.⁵ Other groups were even more extreme.

Genuine church leadership

This can be simply explained in a diagram.



There is no pyramidal authority structure of leadership in the church. In fact, there is no formal structure at all; the church functions like a family. Elders rule by consent and decisions are made by consensus. There is no external human authority over the local church.

Analysis of key words in 1 Cor 12:28

'God has appointed'

This is important. Apostleship (and any church leadership) is not determined by men and is not top-down. True leadership is bottom-up; it arises naturally as a man shares his divinely given gift and begins to minister. This gifting is gradually acknowledged by everyone as being genuine. In time the man with the gift is formally accepted for formal ministry in that gift (teacher, evangelist, apostle etc.).

⁴ John Noble, 'First Apostles Last Apostles', last page (no numbered pages).

⁵ Ibid. See appendix.

Thus Paul planted new churches, established them and then left them to form. Some months later he would return to see what was happening and then formally appoint those whose ministry had come to the surface and was accepted by all.

‘First’

Proton (Strong’s 4412), meaning: first in time or place; first in any succession of things or persons; first of several; first in rank or honour; principal.

Though it can mean first in rank of authority and honour it chiefly means first in time or place; thus ‘First’ Corinthians, ‘First’ letter of John etc. The key is to determine what sense Paul meant.

‘Second’

This simply means ‘second’, the other of two; something that follows; thus it is used or ordinal numbers (‘the second’); what follows in time or place.

This word has nothing to do with honour or authority. It simply means second. This explains what Paul meant by ‘first’; he just meant ‘first’, not chief.

‘Third’

Again, this simply means ‘third’.

‘After that’

This means ‘thereupon, thereafter, afterwards, later, next; marking the sequence of one thing after another’.

Again this points to Paul using ordinal numbers to mark the sequence of something. He is not listing levels of honour but is listing a sequence of events.

After teachers have appeared then there is no further order of sequence but the arrival of a bunch of things: miracles, healings, helps, governments, and tongues.

Interim conclusion

Even at this stage we can say with certainty that Paul is not suggesting that apostles are first in honour as the chief leaders of the churches; he is listing a sequence of happenings.

What is Paul’s point?

The context

The context is all about the body and the various members of that body each having a gift and a part to play in the church. The context is the very opposite of imposing a top-down, hierarchical power structure.

Indeed, Paul goes out of his way to say that the most honour goes to the least presentable parts of the body. Paul’s teaching on the body is the antidote to authoritarianism.

Church building

In the context of body ministry and everyone being equally gifted but in different ways, Paul explains that in the planting of new churches there is an order whereby the gifts of ministry appear.

The first is the apostle because he is the church planter. A church sends an apostle (that is what apostle means, ‘sent’) to plant a new church and so he is the first ministry involved.

In the early days of the church when there was no available Bible and the NT had not even been completed, prophets were vital in the church to bring the word of God. So after an apostle had planted a church then prophetic ministry was important to bring God's word to people.

Next in line are teachers (plural). After the basic foundations had been laid by the apostle and prophet, teachers were necessary to continue the work of instruction in doctrine. In reality the apostle and prophet would leave at this time since the church is now ready to stand on her own two feet once local teachers are in place. Such teachers become elders and lead the church.

Once the teachers are present and appointed as elders, then all sorts of ministries arise and function as the church grows. In apostolic times these included miracles, healings⁶ and tongues but now tongues have certainly ceased⁷ and miracles / healings are rare because they are less necessary today and their purpose in the early church was to authenticate apostolic ministry to start the church (Heb 2:4).

'Helps' is a difficult word to interpret since it only occurs here. It means what it says; it is people gifted in helping and caring and may refer to deacons.

'Governments' is a word used of the steering of a ship. It refers to the ability of elders to guide the church. Steering is an eldership function since it sets the direction of church strategy but it is a different function to instruction, which is the elder's main gift.

Interim conclusion

Paul is certainly not affirming that apostles are the first rank of authority in the local church. Indeed, there are no apostles serving as apostles within the local church at all. An apostle is a person sent out from the church, with the authority of that church, to plant a new church somewhere else. Apostles have no authority at all; only elders have authority.

Apostleship

We need to clarify that there are two types of NT apostle.

The apostles of the lamb

The first are 'the apostles of the lamb',⁸ also called 'the twelve' (Acts 6:2; 1 Cor 15:5). These are the disciples of Jesus chosen to be his representatives. After the death of Judas, Matthias made up the twelve.

There were twelve apostles as patriarchs of the church to equal the twelve tribes of Israel. The twelve apostles were primarily sent to Jews.

⁶ I do not deny that God can work miracles and healing but what we see in Charismatic churches is not healing by Biblical standards. In fact it is not healing at all but temporary pain relief caused by endorphins. Very many claimed healings have been proved to be frauds.

⁷ All accept that tongues ceased after the early church but some groups consider that they started again, usually in the 20th century with Pentecostalism (though some appeared earlier). The problem is that modern tongues are different; they are gibberish when apostolic tongues were human languages spoken by people that had not learned the language. They were also prayers of worship not declarations or prophecies. Modern tongues are false and are either the result of peer pressure, emotionalism, mysticism or occultism. Tongues are common in occult groups.

⁸ Rev 21:14, 'the twelve apostles of the Lamb'.

Paul, though not of the original twelve, was also an apostle of the Lamb because he told us so (Rm 1:1; 1 Cor 1:1, 9:1; 2 Cor 1:1; Gal 1:1; Eph 1:1; Col 1:1 etc.). He was 'born out of time' and saw the Lord, (1 Cor 15:8) and called to be the apostle to the Gentiles (Rm 11:13; 2 Tim 1:11). Paul was an exception because his ministry was to the Gentiles.

These men have a specific and unique type of authority. They were the foundation of the church (Eph 2:20) called to bring the final revelation of Jesus to his people (Jn 16:13-15). As such they were inspired to write Scripture.

The authoritative apostles of the Lamb proved their divine authority by the miracles they produced; these are called the 'signs of an apostle' (2 Cor 12:12). Signs and wonders are reserved for apostles or their delegates. People today do not have this authority.

There is no leader in history that has a role similar to these men. That type of authority is over. [Just as the authoritative ministry of prophets – like OT prophets – is also over: Matt 11:13; Lk 16:16. In the New Covenant the whole body is equal in Christ; all know God.]

The apostles of the churches

The second group is 'the apostles of the churches'.⁹ These are the men sent out of a local church as a missionary to plant new churches. They are messengers or ambassadors sent from the churches that have no special authority over the local church whatsoever.

Numerous men were designated as an apostle (in the Greek text) in the churches: Epaphroditus (Phil 2:25), Barnabas (Acts 14:4), James (Gal 1:19), Titus (2 Cor 8:23), Silvanus and Timothy (1 Thess 1:1 with 2:6), Andronicus and Junia (Rm 16:7). [Note that Junia is not a woman, the name is also used of men¹⁰ and women cannot have authority over men in the church – 1 Tim 2:12 – and apostles initially have authority in the newly planted church; notably to appoint elders.]

Interim conclusion

It is a fallacy of Charismania to teach that certain men called apostles have divine authority over multiple churches. This heresy is dangerous and leads to: cultism, elitism, totalitarianism and men-worship. This claim has been a disaster to the modern churches.

In the same way, Charismatics aver that all sorts of leaders have the ability to perform signs and wonders like the apostles of the Lamb – they do not. I have yet to see a Charismatic leader actually produce a genuine miracle (and I've been looking and reading for nearly 50 years).¹¹

Charismatics fail to observe that there are two types of apostle: the twelve who are unique (plus Paul) and missionaries sent out of the church to plant churches.

⁹ 2 Cor 8:23, 'they are messengers (apostolos) of the churches'.

¹⁰ 'Junias' is Latin, i.e. a Roman name; some say it is a contracted form of 'Junianus', a man's name; others that Junias is a contraction of Junilius. The KJV wrongly translates 'Junias' as 'Junia', which has led to some thinking it was feminine, as the English 'June'.

¹¹ The so-called resurrections from the dead claimed by Pentecostals and Charismatics do not stand up to the light of day. If even one person was genuinely raised it would be front-page news round the whole world. Show me genuine evidence for this. Similarly, every ministry claiming healings that have been tested by impartial Christian doctors has proved to be without foundation. In some cases people that were claimed to be healed died afterwards. In a few cases, such as Smith Wigglesworth, a person badly affected by ministry died as a direct result (Wigglesworth punched a man in the chest to exorcise a demon so hard that he died a few days later).

Conclusion

So, Paul's intention is very clear. He is talking about every member ministry in the church in 1 Cor 12 and within that context he explains that in setting up a new church, apostles come first, followed (in those days) by prophets and finally teachers – who become elders. After that a variety of ministries arise.

Paul is referring to a sequence of events, a timescale, not a hierarchical ranking.

It is really very simple.

Apostles do not rule the local church; in fact, missionary-apostles have no authority within the established local church whatsoever. The local church is led by a plurality of co-equal elders. Apostles will have some authority for a time over newly-planted churches, but this is brief. When they return to their home church they resume whatever ministry they had in that church (evangelist, teacher etc.).

It is time to call LIE to the authoritarianism rampant in Charismatic churches and especially in the New Apostolic Reformation group. There is not a shred of NT evidence to support the rule of churches by an apostle or a prophet – non whatsoever. Local churches are led by elders and no one else.

The disciples, each according to his ability, determined to send relief to the brethren dwelling in Judaea. This they also did, and sent it to the elders. **Acts 11:29-30**

When they had appointed elders in every church. **Acts 14:23**

The elders of the church. **Acts 20:17**

Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, [episkopos] to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. **Acts 20:28**

To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops [episkopos]. **Phil 1:1¹²**

If a man desires the position of a bishop, [episkopos] he desires a good work. **1 Tim 3:1**

The laying on of the hands of the eldership. **1 Tim 4:14**

The elders who rule. **1 Tim 5:17**

Appoint elders in every city. **Titus 1:5**

The elders of the church. **Jm 5:14**

The elders who are among you. **1 Pt 5:1**

¹² 'Bishop' equals 'overseer' and is the same as an elder but was a term more used by Greeks.

Appendix One

The matter of submission in the church

Some may enquire, 'What about the NT commands to submit to leaders?'. Fair point; let us examine this question.

First proposition

We have established that the church is only led by elders and that these act like fathers in the church. There is no single dominating elder and no authoritarianism. Therefore, there can be no blind subservient submission to any man.

We could augment this with commands by the Lord Jesus that the first (leaders) are last and servants of all (Mk 9:35, 10:31).

But Jesus called them to *Himself* and said to them, 'You know that those who are considered rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you shall be your servant. And whoever of you desires to be first shall be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many'. **Mk 10:42-45**

Second proposition

The NT makes clear demands that everyone must be submissive to everyone else.

Submitting to one another in the fear of God. **Eph 5:21**

All of you be submissive to one another, and be clothed with humility, for 'God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble'. **1 Pt 5:5**

In honour giving preference to one another. **Rm 12:10**

Let each esteem others better than himself. **Phil 2:3**

These verses are unequivocal, and the spirit behind them is evident in multitudes of NT texts. All believers should submit to all other believers. No single person should dominate the church.

Objections

What about the first half of Peter's command:

Likewise you younger people, submit yourselves to *your* elders. Yes, all of *you* be submissive to one another, and be clothed with humility, for 'God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble'. **1 Pt 5:5**

This is a simple matter. Here Peter is addressing younger people and commanding them to submit to older people, as is respectful in all societies. The word, however, chiefly means recently born or new and refers mainly to new believers who should submit to and learn from older believers; though it also includes the young in general.

Remember those who rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow, considering the outcome of *their* conduct. **Heb 13:7**

Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you. **Heb 13:17**

Greet all those who rule over you, and all the saints. Those from Italy greet you. **Heb 13:24**

This needs proper unpacking.

‘Obey’ (*peitho*) means: to persuade, i.e. to induce one by words to believe; strive to please one; be persuaded; to listen to, to trust and have confidence in.

Therefore a better translation would be: ‘be persuaded’, or ‘listen to and trust, those over you’.

‘Rule’ (*hegeomai*) means: to lead, to go before, to influence by counsel, to be an overseer, to consider, to think, a chief spokesman. Though it can refer to princes in secular texts, regarding church leaders it is simply associated with the word overseer, or elder. It just means those who are elders over you.

‘Over’, as in ‘rule over’. This word is not in the Greek text but has been added by translators.

In short, this simply means, ‘be persuaded by your elders’.

There is nothing in this verse to support the idea of authoritarian leaders.

Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially those who labour in the word and doctrine. **1 Tim 5:17**

‘Rule’ is *proistemi*, which means: to set or place before; to superintend, preside over; to be a protector or guardian; to give aid, to care for; give attention to.

This simply means elders doing what elders do: caring, guarding, superintending as overseers. It does not denote ‘rule’ in the sense of absolute rule, a lord, control or authoritarianism; that would be a different Greek word, such as *despotes*¹³ or *katakuriuo*.¹⁴

Modern Charismatic authoritarianism

The modern form of authoritarianism found in Charismatic churches in particular is pagan in its outworking and developed in the early 1970s in the UK Restoration Movement and the US Shepherding Movement (which were linked for a time).¹⁵

One of the prompts for this was the book *Spiritual Authority* by Watchman Nee. Nee’s concern had been for the authority of the word of God to filter down through church

¹³ E.g. 2 Timothy 2:21, ‘Therefore if anyone cleanses himself from the latter, he will be a vessel for honour, sanctified and useful for the Master, [*despotes*] prepared for every good work’.

¹⁴ 1 Pt 5:3, ‘nor as being lords [*katakuriuo*] over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock’.

¹⁵ Bob Mumford had direct ties with Bryn Jones and spoke at Harvestime conferences. The others had less contact but some also appeared at various churches and conferences. Ern Baxter had a big influence on the early Restoration leadership and set some of their principles.

leaders and his own style was not as authoritarian as western churches later came to be. In fact, Nee dissociated himself from elements that sought to impose leadership domination (such as Witness Lee and the Shouters).

Using Nee as a support (Nee had a huge following in western churches in the 1970s and 80s as all his books came to be published), the idea of submission came to be accepted by church members.

This was developed further by writers such as Juan Carlos Ortiz¹⁶ and pushed very hard by the Fort Lauderdale Five,¹⁷ who influenced the early UK Restoration leaders and especially the Bradford contingent. This movement became the focus of huge controversy and condemnation in the US, and almost as much in the UK. Their emphasis was upon committed relationships and submission to layers of church leaders (as in the pyramid diagram). It was said that authority went down the pyramid as the tithes went up to the leadership.

Scare stories emerged that were often denied, though many proved to be true, of leadership having unprecedented authority in people's personal lives. Leaders even deemed to have power to determine whom someone should marry and where they should live. People were often told to quit their jobs and move to somewhere beneficial to the church.

In America the movement could not sustain the attacks and gradually broke up, Derek Prince leaving first. However, the Restoration Movement in the UK simply changed names and became more denominationally based in various streams or coalesced into single large churches.¹⁸

The concept of inflexible submission is necessary in churches that become very large and centralised. Sheer numbers of people require layers of hierarchy of spiritual and practical leadership functions. Without submission this hierarchy could not function; thus submission was taught and required. In fact, it was taught that obeying God meant obeying what your particular leader demanded; individual accountability to God was thus diminished.

Another feature of such churches is that the leadership hates questions, especially of flagship policies. Dissenting voices are crushed and many dissenters are forced to leave; even when they are correct in their charges. Inevitably, this impacts families when the father is forced out but his teenage children choose to stay with their friends and social networks.

None of this is Biblical; the whole thing is false and worldly.

When local churches are small, meet in homes, operate like a family and have a couple of equal elders who lead by consensus, none of this occurs.

¹⁶ Especially the book 'Call to Discipleship'.

¹⁷ 'Christian Growth Ministries'; Charles Simpson, Bob Mumford, Derek Prince, Don Basham, Ern Baxter (and also John Poole).

¹⁸ Such as Pioneer People and New Frontiers. The Harvestime group gradually dissipated into various large separate churches.

A final thought, that I have expounded many times before, hierarchical leadership systems focusing upon a single dominating figure is actually a demonic system. It originated in the ranks of fallen angels that submit to Satan and has been worked out in human history in multiple spheres: military command and structure; commercial corporations; national governments; absolute monarchies and many other systems.

The church is categorically intended to be the opposite of such systems ('the first shall be last', leaders are 'servants of all'). When we see churches ruled by a hierarchy dominated by an individual (whatever his title) then we see a failure to obey God and submission to the enemy. It is a demonic system of government.

Finally, the very idea of giving leaders names of honour and authority is specifically condemned by Jesus himself (Matt 23:8).¹⁹ This is why churches are led by elders. The term does not denote formal authority but simply means an older person.

Authoritarian positions in the church are wicked and contrary to God's law. They take the focus away from the Lord Jesus Christ who is the Head of the church.

Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. **1 Pt 5:2-3**

Scripture quotations are from The New King James Version
© Thomas Nelson 1982

Paul Fahy Copyright © 2017
Understanding Ministries
<http://www.understanding-ministries.com>

¹⁹ 'Rabbi' meant 'honourable Sir', and was used as a title of honour for religious teachers of the Jewish law. What the Lord intends by this is any honourable title of authority and especially religious titles. They are forbidden to us.