

Why Is Presbyterianism Biblical?

A Study in the Biblical Foundations of Presbyterian Government

The formation of our United States government is based upon the principles of “Presbyterian” or *representative* government. Since the formation of the church in apostolic times, even with several OT figures (Moses, Joshua, priests, judges, prophets) who were representatives before God, the church has functioned as a representative body, networked with other churches in the advancement of the Kingdom of God

Two key words that describe Presbyterian polity:

- Representative
- Network

Six important biblical principles which form the framework for Presbyterian government:

1. Jesus Christ is the king and head of the church.

- a. Ephesians 5:23: Christ is the head of the church
- b. Colossians 1:18: Christ as the head of the body, the church
- c. Ephesians 1:20-23: God appointed Christ head over everything
- d. Ephesians 4:11: Christ gave some to be apostles, prophets...
- e. Acts 20:28: the church of God, bought with His blood

The preface to the PCA *Book of Church Order* reflects this principle:

Jesus Christ, upon whose shoulders the government rests, whose name is called Wonderful, Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace; of the increase of His government and peace there shall be no end; who sits upon the throne of David, and upon His kingdom to order it and to establish it with judgment and justice from henceforth, even forever (Isaiah 9:6-7); having all power given unto Him in heaven and in earth by the Father, who raised Him from the dead and set Him at His own right hand, far above all principality and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come, and has put all things under His feet, and give Him to be the head over all things to the Church, which is His body, the fullness of Him that filleth all in all (Ephesians 1:20-23); He, being ascended up far above all heavens, that He might fill all things, received gifts for His church, and gave offices necessary for the edification of His Church and the perfecting of His saints (Ephesians 4:10-13).

Jesus, the Mediator, the sole Priest, Prophet, King, Savior, and Head of the Church, contains in Himself, by way of eminency, all the offices in His Church, and has many of their names attributed to Him in the Scriptures. He is Apostle, Teacher, Pastor, Minister, Bishop, and the only Lawgiver in Zion.

It belongs to His Majesty from His throne of Glory to rule and teach the Church through His Word and Spirit by the ministry of men; thus mediately exercising His own authority and enforcing His own laws, unto the edification and establishment of His Kingdom.

Christ, as King, has given to His Church officers, oracles and ordinances; and especially has He ordained therein His system of doctrine, government, discipline and worship, all of which are either expressly set

down in Scripture, or by good and necessary inference may be deducted therefrom; and to which things He commands that nothing be added, and that from them naught be taken away.

Since the Ascension of Jesus Christ to heaven, He is present with the Church by His Word and Spirit, and the benefits of all His offices are effectually applied by the Holy Ghost.

2. The people of God have a right to choose their office bearers under the direction of the Scriptures.

- a. Acts 6:3: “you (all the disciples, see Acts 11:26) select men according to Scriptures’ standard.
- b. Acts 1:21: the election of Matthias to replace Judas came not from Peter, but from the large group.

3. In each church, there is a plurality of elders.

- a. Notice the number of times this occurs:
 - i. Acts 14:23: Paul and Barnabas appointed elders
 - ii. Acts 20:17: Paul sent to Ephesus for the elders
 - iii. Philippians 1:1: “together with all the overseers”
 - iv. James 5:14: “elders of the church” (singular).
 - v. Hebrews 13:7: “leaders... their way, their faith”
 - vi. Titus 1:5: “appoint elders in every town”
 - vii. 1 Peter 5:1: “to the elders among you”
 - viii. 1 Thessalonians 5:12, 13: “respect those... over you in the Lord”
- b. Notice the number of writers that show a geographical absolute:
 - i. Luke: (Acts) 14:23, 20:17, 28
 - ii. Paul: (1 Timothy) 3:1, 5:17, (Titus) 1:5, 7; 1 Thessalonians 5:12,13
 - iii. Peter: (1 Peter 5:1)
 - iv. James: (5:14)
 - v. Hebrews (13:17)
- c. Notice how the whole Mediterranean world held this view:
 - i. Thessalonica (5:12-13)
 - ii. Philippi (1:1)
 - iii. Crete (Titus 1:5-7)
 - iv. Ephesus (Acts 14:23, 20:17, 28, 1 Timothy 3:1)
 - v. Jerusalem (Acts 15)
 - vi. Rome (12)
 - vii. Corinth (1 Corinthians 12:28)

4. Ordination, the setting apart for ministry does not take place with a single elder, but with a presbytery, a group of churches networked in a geographical setting

- a. 1 Timothy 4:14: “body of elders” laid hands
- b. Acts 6:6: men brought to the apostles (who were also elders)
- c. Acts 13:1-3: notice where these elders were from—all over
- d. 1 Timothy 5:22: “do not be hasty with the laying on of hands”

5. The privilege to appeal to an assembly of elders gather together (Acts 15, the Jerusalem Council)

- a. Setting:

- i. 15:1: “some men from Judea came to Antioch saying, unless you are circumscinded, you were not saved.”
 - ii. 15:2: Paul and Barnabas appointed to go to Jerusalem
 - iii. 15:6: the apostles and elders met to consider this issue
 - iv. 15:7ff: Peter’s sermon
 - v. 15:22: the assembly picked Paul, Barnabus, Judas and Silas to go back to Antioch with a letter (15:23)
 - vi. 16:4: this was a decision expected to be obeyed
- b. You also see a pattern in Acts 21:25, Galatians 2, Ephesians 5:21 (the submission principle), Romans 16:1-2, and 3 John 5-11

6. The titles “Bishop” and “elder” refer to the same office

- a. Acts 20:17: Paul calls for “elders” ...When they arrived, he says, “Guard yourself and the flock from which you are overseers.”
- b. Titus 1:5-7: “to appoint elders (5), then “an overseer” (7). Change in terms, but no explanation of any difference
- c. 1 Timothy 3:1 with 5:17: here also there is no explanation given to indicate there was a difference
- d. Two cases where bishops are put alongside deacons (Philippians 1:1 and 1 Timothy 3:1, 8)
- e. 1 Peter 5:1-2: “To the elders” ...” Be shepherds” (*episcopountes* from which we get “Episcopal”). You can literally translate it, “Be bishoping the flock.”

Note here: The Apostles, who are AT LEAST bishops, call THEMSELVES “elders.”

Summary: the six principles of biblical Presbyterian government:

- Christ is the Head of the Church
- The People of God have the right to elect their own representatives
- There is a plurality of elders in every church
- Ordination takes place with a presbytery (elders in churches in a given geographical region)
- The privilege of appeal to a higher assembly or court
- Titles of “elder” and “bishop” are the same in terms of Scriptural function