

The Presbyterian Church in America

A MANUAL FOR NEW MEMBERS

CHAPTER THREE
PRESBYTERIAN GOVERNMENT

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CHAPTER THREE PRESBYTERIAN GOVERNMENT

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The Presbyterian church derives its name from the Greek word, *presbyter*, which is translated *elder*. So a Presbyterian church is one that is governed by elders. Strictly speaking, the Presbyterian church is not a democracy. A democracy, as the term is understood in political science, is a form of government in which a body governs itself, with every member exercising an equal voice in decisions affecting the life of the whole body. The order can be seen in the congregational form of government, such as in Baptist and Congregational churches. These vest the authority of the church in the congregation itself and decisions of every kind—including the reception of members—are made by the congregation as a whole.

Nor is the Presbyterian church a "monarchy." The monarchical form of government is represented by those churches following the episcopal order, that of government by bishops. In the Episcopal, the Methodist and the various Catholic communions, a single person—the bishop or his authorized representative—holds in his hands the spiritual government of the church. He alone can perform important functions and the minister, as his ordinary representative, alone receives members into the church. In the Roman communion, the bishop, or an authorized priest, may form a "corporation of a single whole" alone to hold the properties belonging to the church.

The Presbyterian church follows neither the "democratic" nor the "monarchical," form of government. This form we believe accords with the New Testament pattern. In our system, elders are elected by the congregation for the purpose of governing. Once ordained and installed, they assume full spiritual authority. This order, upon which the government of the U.S. is based, expresses the view that there are those who, by virtue of experience, spiritual maturity and godly piety, are better qualified to interpret the Word of

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God and discern the will of the Lord for the congregation than the congregation as a whole or any single person, cleric or lay. They are called elders.

IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

In the New Testament, which gives us the history of the early Christian church, we find two classes of elders-teaching elders and ruling elders. These two classes of elders are today found in Presbyterian churches. They are equal in authority and differ only in the duties assigned to them by the Constitution. The teaching elder (or minister) is ordained to preach the Gospel and administer the sacraments. Also, he is moderator of the session and shares with the ruling elders authority to administer the spiritual government of the church.

Those who fill the office of elder must meet rigid spiritual requirements. These requirements are set forth clearly in the New Testament (1 Tim.3) and the Book of Church Order, the governmental standard of the church. The teaching elder (or minister of the Word) *should possess a competency of human learning, and be blameless in life, sound in the faith, and apt to teach...* Those who fill the office of ruling elder should also *be blameless in life and sound in the faith; they should be men of wisdom and discretion; and by the holiness of their walk and conversation should be examples to the flock.*

Teaching elders are ordained by the presbytery after they, as candidates under the care of presbytery, have followed a prescribed course of study in college and theological seminary. A presbytery may ordain a candidate only when he has received a call to a definite work. Usually the call is from a congregation to become its pastor, although a candidate may be ordained as teacher or evangelist. Ruling elders are elected by each congregation at a meeting regularly called for that purpose. The session itself ordains and installs new ruling elders when all requirements for instruction and examination have been met.

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Because of the high spiritual qualifications which ruling elders must possess, congregations should exercise the greatest care in their election. Much study should be given to the male members so that only those who can meet the requirements are nominated and elected. Some congregations elect a nominating committee, while others use the plan of having all the members participate in the nomination, perhaps by checking names on a prepared list.

THE SESSION

A local session consists of the pastor or pastors (if there are more than one) and the ruling elders. It is responsible for maintaining the spiritual government of the congregation. In doing this the session has the authority "to inquire into the knowledge, principles, and Christian conduct of the church members under its care." The session has supervision over all organizations of the church: the board of deacons, the Sunday school, the men's organization, the women of the church and the young people. No individual member of the session—pastor or ruling elder—is by himself the session. Members, therefore, may speak in its name only if authorized to do so.

There are three possible other "courts" above the session (although some Presbyterian churches have only two): presbytery, synod and general assembly. The Presbyterian Church in America does not have synods. Some smaller Presbyterian bodies do not have general assemblies but call their top courts, the synod. Most Presbyterian churches are represented in presbytery by all the ministers and one ruling elder from each church within a certain district, except the larger churches are generally allowed more than one ruling elder—perhaps in the ratio of an additional elder for each 500 members, or for each 1,000 members.

The ruling elder representatives to meetings of the presbytery and synod are elected by the session and not by the congregation. While ruling elders are members of the congregation, ministers are not. Ministers are members of the presbytery. In Presbyterian churches which have synods and also a general assembly, ministers may also be members of synod, unless by special

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action the synod has decided to make its membership "delegated." The top courts of Presbyterian churches are generally "delegated," meaning, made up of commissioners elected by the presbyteries. One notable exception at this time is the Presbyterian Church in America whose General Assembly consists of all the ministers and elders from every church in proportion to size. In the Presbyterian Church U.S., commissioners are elected by the presbyteries in proportion to size, one minister and one ruling elder for each 5,000 communicant members counting all the churches in the presbytery.

Presbyteries have the power to receive and issue appeals, complaints and references brought before them in an orderly manner. Presbyteries also have the power to review the records of sessions and to require them to observe the constitution of the church. The presbytery ordains ministers, installs them as pastors and dissolves the pastoral relationship under appropriate circumstances. Presbytery also has the power to organize and dissolve churches and to oversee the churches within its jurisdiction. The size of presbyteries may vary from a few counties in the larger Presbyterian bodies to several states in the smaller churches.

The synod has power to receive and issue all appeals, complaints and references sent from the presbyteries; to review the records of presbyteries and require them to correct anything they may have done contrary to order. The synod must take care that all proper injunctions of higher courts are carried out by the presbyteries. In those denominations having synods below a general assembly, the chief function of such a regional body, which may cover several states, is in the administration of colleges and similar institutions; and in regional activities and programs. In the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America and the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church, the synod is the top court of the church, functioning as the general assembly functions in the other Presbyterian churches. Thus both the RPCNA and the ARP have General Synods which meet once a year to decide matters affecting the denomination as a whole.

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THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY

The highest court in the Presbyterian Church U.S.A., the Presbyterian Church in America, and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church is called the General Assembly. Except for the Presbyterian Church in America, whose General Assembly consists of representatives from all of the churches in the whole denomination, the General Assembly is a delegated body, made up of commissioners (the proper name for voting delegates) elected by the presbyteries. In every church an effort is made to have as nearly the same number of minister commissioners as ruling elder commissioners comprising the General Assembly.

The General Assembly meets once a year. It has the power to receive and issue all appeals, complaints and references regularly brought before it from the lower courts. The records of the lower courts are reviewed and necessary steps are taken to require those courts to correct anything they may have done contrary to order. The General Assembly adopts a budget for all its approved benevolences and authorizes expenditures by its committees, boards or agencies. In most Presbyterian bodies, the budget adopted by the General Assembly is apportioned among the presbyteries in such a way as to encourage equitable giving from the local churches.

The General Assembly also has the power to initiate changes in the constitution of the church, although no Presbyterian church permits its top court to make such changes unilaterally. The process instead is much like the process by which the Constitution of the United States is changed: The top legislative body proposes the change, which then must be approved by a designated proportion of lower, or regional, units. In most Presbyterian churches, changes in the Confession of Faith must be approved by at least two-thirds of the presbyteries after they have been voted by a General Assembly (or General Synod); then ratified by a second General Assembly (or General Synod). Changes in the form of government contained in the Book of Church Order are permitted by most Presbyterian bodies after a majority of the presbyteries have approved and the change has been ratified

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in the next succeeding meeting of the church's top court. Consequently, the lower courts of the churches are very much involved in any changes or alterations in the constitution.

The General Assembly, finally, has the power to accomplish church union with other Presbyterian bodies of like faith and order. Generally, this is done through the adoption of a plan of union drawn up by committees representing the bodies that propose to unite. The voting process is similar to that by which changes in the Constitution are approved. The various courts of a Presbyterian church are not independent of each other but are related to each other in that every act of one court "is the act of the whole church performed by it through the appropriate organ." Thus, in matters affecting the presbytery, the actions taken by that court are actions of the entire church. And in actions taken by the session, it is the Presbyterian church acting. All courts "are one in nature...differing only as the constitution may provide."

THE CONSTITUTION

The constitution of any Presbyterian church consists of two parts: 1) A manual of doctrine generally called the *Confession of Faith*; and 2) A manual of government called the *Book of Church Order*. Churches maintaining the tradition of historic Presbyterianism hold to the *Westminster Confession of Faith* and the *Larger and Shorter Catechisms* as their doctrinal standards.

The Presbyterian Church U.S.A. has adopted, with varying degrees of authority, additional statements of faith as contemporary supplements. The Presbyterian Church U.S.A. accepts a number of confessional statements in addition to the Westminster Confession of Faith, chief among which is a document known as the *Confession of 1967*.

The Presbyterian Church in America and the other Presbyterian churches in the North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council (NAPARC), retained the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms as their doctrinal standards-- believing that church order and unity are enhanced when a church puts into clear language its understanding of what the Scriptures teach.

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This practice (of summarizing the teachings of Scripture in statements of belief for the unity of the church) is what makes a church a confessional church. Briefer confessions, such as the Apostles' Creed, declare the fundamentals of the Christian faith. Larger confessions, such as the Westminster Confession, elaborate upon the entire system of doctrine according to Scripture.

The *Book of Church Order* in a Presbyterian church consists of several parts. First, there is a *Form of Government*, specifying the organization of the church, the function of its various parts and the rules by which it operates. Next, there are *Rules of Discipline* by which problems are met and solved, errors are corrected and erring members and officers dealt with. Under the *Rules of Discipline*, members and officers may even be tried by the courts of the church for offenses committed. However, punishment is limited to admonition, rebuke, suspension and (the most severe) excommunication or separation from the fellowship of the church.

Finally, the *Book of Church Order* contains a *Directory of Worship*, including rules for the conduct of public worship, for the administration of the sacraments and for such occasions as marriages, funerals and dedications.

SUBSCRIPTION

All Presbyterian churches require prospective officers-minister and elder to subscribe to the faith and order of the church. This means that every teaching elder, every ruling elder and every deacon is expected to declare that he accepts the Confession of Faith as a statement of what Scripture teaches and what he believes; and the *Book of Church Order* as the system of government under which he is willing to serve. This affirmation is required before an officer may be ordained and is called subscription.

The act of subscription is not required of church members, only of the officers. Presbyterians believe that the only requirement for membership in the Church of Jesus Christ, which is His body, is a sincere profession of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ as Savior and a promise to serve Him in His church. Thus Christians who have questions about details of Presbyterian doctrine

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may be fully accredited as members of the church. To belong to Christ is to qualify as a member of His church. However, Presbyterians also believe it is fair to expect the leaders of the church to be knowledgeable Presbyterians as well as professing Christians.

In Presbyterian churches the minister occupies a position of prominence because he has undergone many years of study and preparation for the office he holds. On the other hand, the ruling elder devotes a short time in preparation for his office. Yet there is no difference between the minister and ruling elder as they sit together in all church courts. Each has a vote and equal privileges in debating questions. The minister who has been called by a congregation to become its pastor accepts the responsibility of spiritual leader. He should keep the session informed of important matters to be decided by this court, and the ruling elders who accepted responsibility for supervising the spiritual government of the congregation must share with the pastor the endeavor to find the solution to every problem.

When a decision is reached it should be that of the entire session and not simply of the pastor or of a few leading elders. The pastor, with the ruling elders, must keep in close touch with the members in order to know their spiritual needs. In his relationship to presbytery the minister has continuous membership while the ruling elder membership changes from meeting to meeting. This gives an advantage to the minister and with it greater responsibility. Also, since ministers give full time to the work of the church they are called upon for a wider service in presbytery. Every minister is called upon for a considerable amount of work on various committees of presbytery. The faithful rendition of this service makes possible the effective functioning of presbytery. Naturally, ruling elders are called upon to share in important committee work.

--Dr. Scott was for many years the beloved stated clerk of the PCUS.