

OUR LIFE TOGETHER

LESSON THREE: LIFE TOGETHER - AS PRESBYTERIANS

The story is told of a Baptist church that was trying to raise funds for a new building. On the last day of the fund drive, the pastor announced that the church had raised two million dollars...and three cents. The pastor said, "There must be a Presbyterian among us!"

A hand was raised at the back: "No, there are three of us!" Ha-ha.

What is a Presbyterian? The "frozen chosen"? How can we know, when we can't even spell it? (Bonus fact: rearrange the letters in "Presbyterian," and you get...Britney Spears!)

If you have ever had experience with a Presbyterian Church, you have certain images of what a Presbyterian is. What does it mean to have a life together as Presbyterians?

HOW MIGHT WE ORGANIZE A CHURCH?

Before we answer that specific question, let's survey the landscape. In general, churches are organized in one of three ways. There are exceptions, but these are the most common:

1. MONARCHY

This is rule by one leader, with a series of leaders below that leader on an organizational ladder.

This is like a government ruled by a king. The king is in charge, and the people under him carry out his will. There are few or no votes. There can be little or no dissent. Even if votes and dissent are possible, when the day is done, the king decides.

This form of government is most often associated with the Roman Catholic Church, where the pope is the head of the church. Any leader beneath the pope derives his authority from the pope, and he must answer to the pope.

But this is not just the Roman Catholic Church. Have you ever been in a church where the pastor

is effectively the monarch? He makes all or most of the decisions, and ultimately possesses all of the power. There may be other leaders, and working boards and committees, but his word is law.

2. DEMOCRACY

While monarchy is rule of all by one leader, democracy is rule by all, even if there is a leader. It is rule by self-government, and only with the consent of the majority in the government.

This is close to the American form of government, but not quite. (When people say we live in a democracy, they are wrong. We live in a republic.)

You might also know this as the “Congregational” form of government. We see this most often in Baptist and similarly-minded congregations. Everyone has a voice and a vote. Many, even most of the decisions are made by vote. Majority rules. Minority loses.

As you can see, monarchy and democracy are opposites. In a monarchy, one person decides. In a democracy, everyone decides.

3. REPRESENTATIVE

If monarchy is rule by one, and democracy is rule by all, representative government is rule by elected officials.

This is most similar to our American form of government. Think about it: how often do we vote to decide specific issues? Not often.

Instead, we elect people to make decisions for us - in Congress, in the State General Assembly, and on the City and County councils. We make like their decisions or hate their decisions, and we have the option of returning them or booting them at the next election. But we entrust decisions to them, while we follow our daily callings.

This “representative” form of government not only resembles our American form of government, but it closely resembles the Presbyterian form of government. In Presbyterianism, the congregation

elects leaders, and has the ability to hold them accountable, but those leaders decide most issues.

WHAT IS THE PRESBYTERIAN FORM OF GOVERNMENT ALL ABOUT?

Do you remember the game show, “Name That Tune”? “Tom, I can name that tune in three notes.” Well, I can define Presbyterian government in three words: *RULE BY ELDERS*.

We think of Presbyterians as people who baptize babies. We do. We think of Presbyterians as people who believe in predestination. We do. But those beliefs are not the exclusive property of Presbyterians.

The distinctive feature of Presbyterianism is that we are led by a group of men called “elders.” The word “elder” is an English translation of the Greek word “presbuteros” - which leads to that difficult-to-spell word, “Presbyterian.”

So when you say a church is Presbyterian, you are saying the church is led by a group of people called the elders. Not just the pastor. Not all the people. The elders. The pastor may be influential. The people surely have certain rights and responsibilities. But the elders lead.

What, then, is an elder? An elder is a man who has been prepared by God and called by God to exercise spiritual leadership in the church.

We find *the qualifications* in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. We won’t work through them now, but we need to notice that they are there. In other words, we don’t believe everyone in the church can enter leadership. Only those biblically qualified can enter the office of elder.

This is important, because in our “democratic” culture, we tend to offer positions of authority to anyone who is breathing! “Hey, it’s your turn to serve! Step up to the plate!” We don’t do that with leadership. We carefully evaluate and train our leaders.

What are *the duties* of the elders? “Tom, I can answer that question in ONE word!”

We shepherd. In 1 Peter 5, Peter urges the elders to “Be shepherds of God’s flock.” The word there is a verb. We are to actively shepherd the people God has entrusted to us.

But what is shepherding? At its heart, the office of elder shepherds in two ways:

WE LOOK OUT. We oversee the work of the church, and the lives of the people of the church. We are responsible before God for everything that happens in the life of the church.

If we are smart, we will delegate details. We cannot know everything, or everything about everyone. But we are to “keep watch,” in the words of Paul to the elders in Ephesus.

WE LEAD ON. We strive to be examples to the people of the church, as we lead God’s people to lives that more and more honor Jesus. We do this with our words and our deeds.

Are we perfect? Far from it. Part of our “leading on” should be our ability to admit when we falter and fail. But if we have been prepared and called to lead, we should lead, and you ought to strive to follow our example.

What is the *organization* of the elders? How do we do our work?

When we are gathered as a group, we are called *the Session*. This is composed of the *Teaching* and *Ruling* elders of the church.

The *Teaching* elders are the men who are called to the full-time ministry of preaching and teaching.

The *Ruling* elders are the men who have other callings in their daily lives, but gather with the Teaching elders to lead the church.

We believe this reflects the order in the New Testament, especially as we see Paul instructing Timothy about elders in 1 Timothy 5:17: *The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching.*

All elders should be able to teach, but the Teaching elders are especially gifted and called to this. So we make this distinction between the two types of elders.

BUT!!! We are all equally elders, with equal authority and responsibility in the church. The Teaching elder who serves as pastor is the leader of the leaders, but the Ruling elders are still “complete” elders, with all the rights and responsibilities of the office.

We cannot ignore another issue. What about *women* in the office of elder?

In the Presbyterian Church in America, we believe the office of elder is open only to men. We believe this is the clear teaching of the New Testament, for it reflects man’s call to be the spiritual leader in the home and the church.

We realize this is a minority view in our culture, and even among the various Presbyterian denominations. We believe women are equally made in God’s image, and we believe they are blessed with many, many gifts that we should celebrate and cultivate in the church.

But we also believe that while men and women are equal in *value*, they have distinct *roles*. Paul’s words about the office of elder were inspired by the Holy Spirit, and they are clear. We must strive to be faithful to them, even when they oppose the currents of our culture and even our hearts.

The office of elder is one of two ordained offices in the Presbyterian church. The other is *deacon*.

Deacons also must meet certain *qualifications*. They are outlined in 1 Timothy 3. As with the elders, this is not a “Come one, come all” office. Deacons must be evaluated, trained and tested.

Deacons also have specific *duties*. In Acts 6, we read of the appointment of the men whose contribution to the church led to the continuing the office of deacon.

The office of deacon is an office of...

SYMPATHY. The deacons are responsible for what we call “mercy ministry.” They seek to meet the physical and material needs of people in the church and community.

SERVICE. The deacons are responsible to provide practical help for the functioning of the church. This includes everything from the lights in the sanctuary to the money. This is really important! We are called to honor, assist and bless our deacons!

What is the difference between the office of elder and the office of deacon? One way to capture it is to call the elder an office of “word,” and the deacon an office of “deed.” The elders consider how to bring the ministry of God’s Word into the church and community, and the deacons do things that allow this to happen!

The deacons operate under the authority of the elders. If the elders are wise, they will give the deacons great freedom. But the deacons are responsible to report to the elders.

The deacons also gather as a group - usually monthly. As well, the elders and deacons meet occasionally - four times a year, if possible.

Can *women* serve as deacons? In the Presbyterian Church in America, we allow only men to serve in the office of deacon.

Admittedly, the biblical case for this is not as clear to some. In our circles, and even in closely related churches, some believe the Bible permits women to serve in this office. This has been the source of much discussion in the PCA over the past few years. But for now, deacons are men.

HOW IS THE REST OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH ORGANIZED?

We are a “connectional” church. This means we are connected to other churches in our larger denomination, the Presbyterian Church in America.

The way of our culture is to be “independent.” In many cases, churches will have no formal connection to each other, with only some loose associations for fellowship.

We believe the local church should be connected to the larger church. We see this in Acts 15, where local churches gathered to decide an important question. We believe it is valuable for our congregations to work together in shared ministry and mutual accountability.

The *Presbytery* consists of all the churches in a geographical region.

Christ Presbyterian Church is currently part of Ohio Valley Presbytery, which covers much of southern Indiana, southern Ohio, and the northern half of Kentucky. Ohio Valley Presbytery has voted to “divide” and create a new Central Indiana Presbytery, hopefully in 2010.

Churches are represented at our Presbytery meetings by the Teaching and Ruling elders of the congregations. The Teaching elders are members of the Presbytery, and we appoint delegates to meetings from among our Ruling elders.

What do Presbyteries do? We eat! But more importantly, we...

* Examine present and future Teaching elders who want to participate in ministry within our Presbytery. We have a rigorous examination process. Men must complete this to be ordained. Additionally, when ordained men transfer here, we examine them.

* Handle issues from churches that could not be resolved at the local level. Sometimes a Session will make a decision that will lead to a dispute in a church. Presbytery seeks to help resolve it.

* Organize churches. We give a major commitment of our time, talents and treasures to church planting. We believe the gospel is spread most effectively through new churches, so we are always working to plant new PCA churches in our area.

The *General Assembly* consists of all the churches and ministers of the entire denomination - the Presbyterian Church in America.

General Assembly is “constructed” just like Presbytery - with Teaching and Ruling elders from churches. With General Assembly, all the churches everywhere are able to send delegates.

General Assembly meets each June, and...

* Reviews the work of the Presbyteries.

* Reviews the work of the different agencies of our denomination, such as our seminary, our

college, our church planting agency, and our world missions agency. (We will talk about these ministries in the next lesson).

* Handles issues that could not be resolved by Presbyteries. Just as Session issues are sometimes sent to Presbytery, Presbytery problems sometimes come to General Assembly.

BUT!!! As you consider our “life together” in this church, you need to know that the general operating principle in the PCA is for local Session control.

The PCA headquarters is in Atlanta. No one in Atlanta tells us what texts to preach about, or which subjects to teach about, or when to have a missions event, or anything like that.

We have accountability. We can be “disciplined,” especially for teaching falsehood that strikes at the heart of our beliefs. But the daily work of Christ Presbyterian Church is directed and guided by our local Session, not Presbytery or General Assembly.

SO WHAT?

Why is this important? Why is it good for you to have a sense of this structure, as you ponder our life together? I humbly offer two reasons:

1. TO PREVENT PROBLEMS

I have never forgotten a conversation with a man in my congregation in Minnesota. He had been part of a PCA church in Florida, which frankly didn’t function much like a PCA church.

He wanted me to do something fairly important. I said, “I will talk to the Session and get back to you.” He said, “What? In my church in Florida, the pastor did whatever he wanted.”

“Sorry,” I said. “I have to go to the Session about this.”

We all come to churches with expectations.

Maybe you have a Catholic or similar background. You expect the pastor to be in charge. When he says “Jump!”, the elders say, “How high?” But that is not our form of government. We lead the

church as a Session.

Maybe you have a Baptist or similar background. You expect to vote on everything. You grump, “How could they buy that carpet without my approval?” But that is not our form of government. In certain situations, we do vote as a congregation. But the Session leads the church.

Please understand this as you ponder life together with this body. One of the membership vows is to submit to the government of the church, as we have organized it.

2. TO SOLVE PROBLEMS

We believe this is a biblical pattern of church government: two offices, with connection to the larger church. If that is so, this should work!

The church is far from perfect, and our denomination is far from perfect, but done right, this form of government does work.

As a congregation, we can do our work in an orderly manner.

As a Presbytery, we can help congregations get started, begin to grow, and find peace in times of trouble.

As a General Assembly, we can bring clarity and wisdom to the difficult issues facing our congregations.

Honestly, it is sometimes like making sausage. It isn't pretty to see. We are sinful men, and we still struggle with our sinful nature.

But in his mercy, this is how God has organized this form of government we call “Presbyterian,” and we believe it is good.