

Church Government: Structure¹

I. Forms of church government

- Hierarchical:
 - Examples: Anglican, Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox.
 - Priests rule completely at a local congregation. Over them are bishops, and then higher officers, culminating in one person (a pope, or an archbishop, etc.), who has final authority over the whole denomination.
- Independent:
 - Examples: baptist churches, and most non-denominational churches.
 - Each church is autonomous from the others. Although they may have partnerships with other churches and may accept advice from other churches, no church or individual has authority over any other church.
 - Variation at the local level: some are completely ruled by one pastor. Others have a board of elders who rule jointly.
- Presbyterian

II. Biblical argument for presbyterian government

- The defining features of a presbyterian form of government:
 1. The uniqueness of Christ's kingship.
 2. The plurality of leaders at every level, except for Christ the king.
 3. An ascending system of rule (presbyteries that rule over congregations in a region and a general assembly over presbyteries, or some similar system).
- Jesus' uniqueness as king:
 - He alone has all authority in heaven and on earth (Matt 28:18), he alone is head of the church (Eph 4:15; 5:23).
 - He is the sole mediator between God and his people (1 Tim 2:5): you must come to the Father through him (John 14:6). No other human being mediates God to us.
 - All authority comes from Jesus. No person may claim authority unless Jesus has delegated that authority (John 19:11; Rom 13:1).
 - Presbyterians believe that they rule by "divine right": that is, Jesus the high king delegates his authority to certain officers of his church.
- Plurality of leaders at every other level besides the top (Jesus):
 - No one person can "call the shots."
 - When Scripture refers to local church leaders, it uses the plural:
 - Heb 13:17: "Obey your leaders and submit to them..."
 - Acts 14:23: "they ... appointed elders for them in every church"
 - Jesus sent out his disciples in groups of two (Mark 6:7).
 - The word "presbyterian" comes from the Greek word for elder. The Scripture does not recognize different ranks of rulers (e.g., a bishop over an elder). Rather, the word "bishop" is a synonym for "elder" (see Acts 20:17, 28; Tit 1:5, 7).
- An ascending system of rule, where churches hold each other accountable:

¹ These articles helped me in preparing this:

<https://tabletalkmagazine.com/article/2022/08/the-importance-of-a-plurality-of-elders/> and <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/why-you-should-be-a-presbyterian/>

- The churches in Jerusalem and Antioch were massive, spread throughout each city, and yet still considered one “church” (Acts 8:1; 9:31; 13:1; etc.).
- Acts 15: when an important matter that concerned the whole church came up, the apostles and elders met together to decide the issue.
 - Note! It was decided by *all* the delegates. Luke says, “it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church” (Acts 15:6).
 - They then issued a letter, and all the churches were bound by it.
- Donald Macleod: “From the very beginning the church had a unified, collegial leadership extending to all its congregations. That leadership was directly involved and consulted at every critical point in the development of the emerging people of God: the reception of the Samaritan church (Acts 8:14), Peter’s mission to Cornelius (Acts 11:1ff.) and Paul’s ministry to the Gentiles (Gal. 2:9). The idea of totally isolated, fully autonomous churches is wholly alien to the New Testament.”
- Presbyterianism is not necessary for the *being* of a church (i.e., for a church to be a church). But it is necessary for the *well-being* of a church:
 - It provides mutual accountability. Mark Jones: “Particular congregations need the protection of other congregations, just as pastors need the protection and (sometimes) discipline of other pastors.”
 - In an abundance of counselors there is wisdom and safety (Prov 11:14).
 - It helps to safeguard the truth (Acts 20:28-31). No sudden shifts from a reformed pastor to an arminian pastor.
 - Greater pastoral care for the flock (Num 11:16-17; 1 Pet 5:1-2).
- What does each level do?
 - Local sessions: receiving and disciplining members, enacting the ministry of word and sacrament, overseeing worship, ordaining elders and deacons.
 - Presbytery: ordaining and disciplining ministers, judging on complaints against sessions, resolving doctrinal questions, encouraging church planting in new areas, recognizing or dissolving congregations.
 - General assembly: everything that presbyteries cannot resolve, as well as organizing or dissolving presbyteries, and joint ventures like missions.

III. Applications

- Beware entrusting yourself to a church where:
 - There is one person who calls all the shots.
 - Or: where the church accepts no authority or accountability from other churches.
- Even when the structure is presbyterian, the ethos can be a cult-like respect for one person, where no one has the courage to challenge that leader.
- Working together takes time! “The gears of presbyterianism turn slowly.” But it is worth it.
- Use the courts of the church to avoid division. Instead of gossip and despair when leaders act wrongly and won’t listen, there are higher courts of appeal.
- Covenant is deeply one with the rest of the OPC. Do you think of yourselves as being “one church” with them?