

Presbyterian Government

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During these spring months many men will come together in different places in the world for government, not for countries or states, but for our churches. Presbyterian and Reformed ministers and elders will meet in presbyteries, synods, and general assemblies.

Every church has a government of some kind. Some are ruled by appointed officials (hierarchism), some are local democracies (congregationalism), and some use a system of elected representatives (Presbyterianism). We believe this last form of government is the most Scriptural.

The Bible talks about the church and how it should be governed. While much is said about the character and qualities of those who lead, certain things are clear also about how the church leaders are to go about their duties. About 150 years ago Irish Presbyterian minister and professor Thomas Witherow wrote a small book, *The Apostolic Church: Which Is It?* He set forth six principles found in the New Testament. Here they are listed, with an example of a passage for each:



Ordination of elders
in 19th century Scotland

1. Office-bearers were chosen by the people (Acts 6:3,4)
“Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you ... men of *good* reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom...”
2. The office of bishop and that of elder are identical (Acts 20:17,28)
“...[Paul] sent to Ephesus and called for the elders of the church.... *** Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God...”

3. There was a plurality of elders in each church (Acts 14:23)
“So when they had appointed elders in every church...”
4. Ordination was an act of the presbytery—that is, a plurality of elders (1 Tim 4:14)
“Neglect not the gift that is in thee, which was given thee by prophecy, with the laying on of the hands of the presbytery.”
5. The assembled elders from the various churches exercised rights of government and received appeals (Acts 15:2-23; 16:4)
“...they determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles and elders, about this question. *** And as they went through the cities, they delivered to them the decrees to keep, which were determined by the apostles and elders at Jerusalem.”
6. Christ was recognized as the only head of the church (Eph 5:23)
“...Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body.”

These arguments show what type of church government we should have. The Presbyterian form of government meets all six of these requirements, while congregationalism meets only three, and hierarchism meets none of them.

Through the centuries Presbyterians have labored and suffered much to be loyal to these biblical principles of church government. Today congregations elect their ministers, elders, and deacons; and presbyteries ordain ministers. Local sessions and regional presbyteries and assemblies govern the church. All this is done under the authority of Christ, the Head of the church, who governs and blesses his church by the Holy Spirit. May we continue to honor him and his Word!



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