

The Basics of Presbyterian Polity

A Leader Reader by Brian Ellison

Decently and in Order

Every church of any denomination or tradition has a polity. “Polity” simply refers to the system by which a body is organized and governed. “Polity” does not mean “politics”—with that word’s connotations of partisanship and special interests doing battle—although some people would say every church has those, too. Church polity, rather, is a shared understanding of how we are going to live together, how we will make decisions, how we will be accountable to one another, and how we will act together to do God’s work.

Presbyterians, even more than other Christians, are concerned with polity. We test our future ministers on it with a formal exam (the only other exam subjects are theology, worship, and the Bible). We host national conferences on polity and have an official in each local presbytery whose central function is to see that we do our work—as Presbyterians never tire of saying—“decently and in order.” Even our name—from the Greek word *presbyteros* for “elder”—refers to how we govern ourselves.

But at the same time, it is a love-hate relationship that many of us seem to have with polity. We mock ourselves relentlessly (Out of coffee? Better form a committee . . .), and we have been known to mutter about the slow pace that shared decision-making requires. We’re grateful for the organization when we have difficult situations, but sometimes it all seems like such a burden. Last week, someone made a motion that we adjourn . . . and this was at youth group!

Presbyterian Polity

Nevertheless, the reason Presbyterians are so committed to their polity is a theological one: We believe

Prayer

God our shepherd,
you have brought us through this day
to a time of reflection and rest.
Calm our souls,
and refresh us with your peace.
Keep us close to Christ
and draw us closer to one another
in the bonds of his wondrous love.
We pray through Christ our Lord.
Amen.

—*Book of Common Worship*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 521.

God has created the church to be a covenant community, a place where people live together in a way that demonstrates the justice and righteousness of God’s reign—even a place that reflects the gracious covenant God has made with humanity. We want to ensure fairness and equity, honoring the Holy Spirit’s presence and activity in every believer. And we recognize that God equips certain people with gifts for leadership and service. We structure our church organization as we do because we prayerfully hope it best seeks the mind of Christ for our life together.

Presbyterians have a polity that is—are you ready for this?—*presbyterian*. Usually, so do churches that call themselves “Reformed” and even a few state churches, like the Church of Scotland. That means our polity is *not* “congregational,” where authority for governance rests with the local congregation, (as in Baptist or Con-

gregational churches, for example); nor is it *episcopal*, with authority vested in a succeeding hierarchy of bishops (as in Roman Catholic, Anglican, or Lutheran churches). Presbyterian polity entrusts authority to governing bodies consisting of presbyters, a biblical term for an office we take to include both ministers of the Word and Sacrament and elders.

A presbyterian polity, like a congregational system, recognizes the presence of the Holy Spirit in the lives of more than just a few. The whole church joins together to identify and set apart elders with the gifts and calling to lead, and in so doing testifies to the way God moves through a community—a fundamental Reformed understanding.

But a presbyterian polity, like an episcopal system, also recognizes the interconnectedness and unity of God's people. We in the Presbyterian Church seek to show as much as possible that we are “one body,” with Christ as our head. Consider this paragraph from the *Book of Order*, one of our constitutional documents:

That the several different congregations of believers, taken collectively, constitute one Church of Christ, called emphatically the Church; that a larger part of the Church, or a representation of it, should govern a smaller, or determine matters of controversy which arise therein; that, in like manner, a representation of

the whole should govern and determine in regard to every part, and to all the parts united: that is, that a majority shall govern; and consequently that appeals may be carried from lower to higher governing bodies, till they be finally decided by the collected wisdom and united voice of the whole Church. For these principles and this procedure, the example of the apostles and the practice of the primitive Church are considered as authority. (G-1.0400)

That paragraph, approved in 1797, is known as the “radical principles” because it sets forth the roots, or basic foundation, of our system. At the time, it might well have been considered “radical” in another sense, too; the idea that church leaders coming together might exercise mutual authority and discipline toward one another was a serious claim against the more independent rule of Congregationalists and the more hierarchical rule of churches governed by bishops.

Know Your Polity

Today, congregations are governed by sessions (consisting of ministers and a certain number of elders in a particular church). These are under the authority of presbyteries, which include all the ministers plus an equal number of elders in a given region. Presbyteries are grouped into synods, and everyone is governed by the denomination's most inclusive governing body, the General Assembly, which meets biennially in a different location around the country.

The *Book of Order* (Part II of the Constitution, taking a back seat only to our Confessions) is a “must-read” for church officers, whose vows include the commitment to “be governed by our church's polity” and to “abide by its discipline.” It provides the theological convictions that undergird our structure, rules and guidelines for every aspect of our corporate life, a directory for the proper manner of worship, and rules for exercising church discipline in ways that preserve both the peace and the purity of the church.

In the end, our polity is an exercise in honoring God through our corporate life. Although its details may sometimes seem burdensome or complex, our governance—in its persistent striving for order instead of chaos—seeks to be part of God's creative, reconciling, restorative activity in the world. By calling forth individuals' gifts, by creating an organized system for action, by ensuring consistent application of agreed-upon truths, and by establishing a procedure for bringing about change that the Spirit may direct us

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toward, our polity expresses our faith. Once we are called by God, trained in Scripture, and empowered in worship, then our polity gives us a way to go forth together in ministry, truly being the church for the world God has made.

For More Information

James W. Angell, *How to Spell Presbyterian*, rev. ed. (Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 2002). See the chapter on polity.

Book of Order (Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2009). There is no better book on Presbyterian polity—for historical context, theological foundation, and daily application—than the *Book of Order* itself. It would not be a bad thing for every Presbyterian to have a copy; for officers, it is a “must-read,” especially the first four chapters of the Form of Government, which represent the foundation of our governance.

William Chapman, *History and Theology in the Book of Order: Blood on Every Page* (Louisville, KY: Witherspoon Press, 1999). The long-time polity instructor at Princeton Theological Seminary, Chapman’s book brings a passion (as the dramatic subtitle

suggests) borne of a lifetime reading and using the church’s constitution.

Joan S. Gray and Joyce C. Tucker, *Presbyterian Polity for Church Officers*, 3rd ed. (Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 1999). This book is still the defining polity textbook and an interesting and accessible read for anyone who desires to learn more. The fourth edition provides the most up-to-date information on the *Book of Order*, published in 2012 by Geneva Press.

Clifton Kirkpatrick and William H. Hopper Jr., “Presbyterians Do It Decently and in Order,” in *What Unites Presbyterians* (Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 1997). Kirkpatrick, past Stated Clerk of the General Assembly, was charged with preserving the Constitution of the church. It is no surprise, then, that he and Hopper do an excellent job of laying out simply and clearly the theological foundations of our governance.

About the Writer

Brian Ellison is pastor of Parkville Presbyterian Church in Parkville, Missouri, and a former stated clerk of Heartland Presbytery.