
WHAT IS PRESBYTERIANISM?

By Thomas E. Peck¹

What is Presbyterianism? To borrow the definition by a great Presbyterian theologian of the nineteenth century, Presbyterianism is a form of church government “by parliamentary assemblies, composed of two classes of presbyters, and of presbyters only, and so arranged as to realize the visible unity of the whole church.” [Thornwell, *Collected Writings*, IV:267.]

Presbyterianism is first a government by parliamentary assemblies. These assemblies are elected by the people, but they are not, strictly speaking, responsible to the people who elect them. Rather, they are responsible to uphold the constitution under which they serve, even if this may go against the preferences of those who elected them to office. In the church, this constitution is not determined by the people of the church, but rather is provided for them by Jesus Christ, who is the king and head of the church.

Thus, the first responsibility of the parliamentary assemblies, by which the church is governed, is to the Lord Jesus Christ. In electing men to these assemblies (called, in the PCA, sessions, presbyteries and the General Assembly), the people of the church are simply recognizing the call that God himself has placed on these men to service in the church.

Another distinctive of Presbyterian government is found in the makeup of these parliamentary assemblies. They are made up exclusively of presbyters (or elders). These elders, however, are of two sorts—those who rule only, and those who both rule and teach. In the PCA, this distinction is recognized by the titles of ruling elder and teaching elder. The fact that both are elders, however, is significant. The ruling elders are not a lesser class of elders. They are necessary to the adequate functioning of the ruling assemblies of the church. The functions of ruling and teaching elder differ, but their status is the same. This fact is often referred to as the parity of the offices, or the parity of the teaching and ruling elders.

Hence it is important for ruling elders to take an active role in the government of the church, not only at the session level, but at the presbytery and General Assembly level as well.

The third distinctive feature of Presbyterianism is the way in which it displays the visible unity of the church. All the courts of the church are presbyteries—that is, they are composed of presbyters. The unity of the church is not gained by subjecting one class of rulers to another class (for example, the subjection of priests to bishops), but by all those who rule being of the same class. Hence, when General Assembly meets, the small church is represented by the same class of men as is the large church. In this respect all churches are equal in their representation in the ruling assemblies.

It is our belief that the principles of this system are found in the New Testament, and further, are the principles adopted by the apostles in the first century. That is, these three distinctive principles—1) government by representative assemblies; 2) those representatives being of two sorts, but of the same class; and 3) the unity of the church displayed by government at all levels being exercised by one class of men; are the principles set forth in the New Testament by the Lord Christ for the proper government of his church.

¹ This essay is based on “The Spirit of Presbyterianism,” by Thomas E. Peck, published in the *Memorial Volume of the Semi-Centennial of the Theological Seminary at Columbia, South Carolina*.