

What is Presbyterian Government?

There are three possible forms of church government: Congregational, Episcopal, and Presbyterian. Government simply describes how a body of people organized into a particular church or denomination function together.

Congregational government represented in our community by Baptist churches asserts that each individual congregation is autonomous and in no way subject to another congregation. In small congregational churches the congregation rules directly as in a pure democracy. In the larger churches some delegation is required, so the board of deacons will take on more of a representative role for the congregation.

Episcopal government represented in our community by the Methodist, Episcopal, and Roman Catholic churches asserts that rule of the church is from the top down. Bishops and overseers rule over assigned churches. The churches are connected under the authority of the bishops.

Presbyterian government asserts that the authority of Christ is administered through the congregation by the elected representatives of the congregation called Elders, or presbyters from the greek word in the new testament. You have probably heard of presbyopia, a condition of the eyes associated with age that involves a growing inflexible lens that cannot see things up close clearly without the aid of glasses. This is elder eyes.

The connectionalism of the Presbyterian government is from the congregation up, rather than from the top down as in the Episcopal form of government. The congregations are joined together in Presbyteries through the Elder representatives of the church. And the whole church joined together in the General Assembly. The connectional element affords the local congregation the benefit of the whole church in matters of doctrine or discipline. Think of a target with a bulls eye and concentric circles. The bulls eye is the local congregation, the next ring is the Presbytery, and the third ring is the General Assembly.

We find this Presbyterianism in the model church in the book of Acts. When the Apostle Paul established a church elders were elected. Always a plurality of elder leaders elected by the church. (Acts 14:23 "Paul and Barnabas ordained elders (or had elders elected) for them in each church and with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust.") And Acts 15 elder representatives from the church at Antioch went up to Jerusalem for a meeting to discuss and determine the question of whether it was necessary for a non Jew to be circumcised in order to be saved. After deliberation the gathered elders and apostles determined that it was not. This decision was binding on the church at Antioch and all the churches.

Presbyterian government offers wonderful checks and balances while ensuring local church freedom.