

Most Important/Relevant Questions...

1. What makes a church “Presbyterian”?

2. What do ALL Presbyterians have in common?

“Presbyterian” is actually NOT a theological distinction.

- Historically, we actually have differing theologies.
- We cover the theological spectrum from Fundamentalists to Liberals... most, however, consider themselves to be “Reformed”

“Presbyterian” does NOT denote a particular way to worship

- A believer/church can be “Presbyterian” and worship in a traditional OR contemporary manner.

The ONE THING that ALL Presbyterian have in common: Governance (i.e., Polity)

Marks of our Historical Presbyterian Polity:

1. Church governed by Elders: Ruling Elders (Laypeople) and Teaching Elders (Pastors)

a. These elders are elected by the members of a body (i.e., “Council”)...

i. Ruling Elders are ordained/installed by the congregation

ii. Teaching Elders ordained/installed by presbytery

2. We are a system of checks and balances.

a. No ONE governing body has unilateral authority over another...

b. ...but when there are irregularities, the higher governing body has the authority to intervene in the lower body.

3. For an intervention to occur, there must be cause since ALL governing bodies have rights and privileges uniquely vested in them.

Summary: These are the essential Marks of Historical Presbyterian Polity... those which ALL Presbyterians have in common regardless of their worship/theological differences.

Transition: What has happened in the PCUSA is that we have ventured away from historical practices and endorsed a new polity and hermeneutic (way of interpreting).

1. The PCUSA has had a significant shift away from Biblical Authority and toward Religious Humanism and Pluralism.
 - a. No longer do we believe in *Sola Scriptura* (Scripture Alone), now the PCUSA combines Biblical interpretation with secular teaching to develop a new theology and practice whereby the Bible is NOT the sole authority for living a Christian life.
 - i. For example, officers under the old system were to lead their lives “under the authority of Scripture and guided by the Confessions.” NOW...officers are selected by churches/presbyteries “*guided by the Scriptures and confessions.*” (A subtle but substantive shift)
2. The PCUSA is now operating outside of the historically understood essentials of “Presbyterian” Polity.
 - a. As of July 11, 2011, the parity between governing bodies has been significantly weakened with deference to a hierarchical structure that allows the higher governing bodies (Presbytery, Synod, General Assembly) to more easily assume original jurisdiction of a lower governing body.
 - b. Most believe they can do so without cause via Authoritative Interpretations or Commissions acting on behalf of General Assembly.
 - c. Thus, essentially, the PCUSA is no longer operating under historically held Presbyterian polity/practice but has become more like the Roman Catholic and/or Episcopal church. The difference is: we do not have Bishops that control the local church...we have “bodies” over us. Note, below, how the new constitution calls for allegiance to the leadership of the higher bodies. This is without precedence.

New Language in the New Form of Government denoting hierarchical
authority... (emphasis added)

G-1.0103 - Governed by the Constitution of the PC (U.S.A.)

Each congregation of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) shall be governed by this Constitution. The members of a congregation put themselves under the leadership of the session and the higher councils (presbytery, synod, and General Assembly).

3. The PCUSA has reduced ordination standards to a local decision/action to which the national church becomes subservient.
 - a. The “standards” for ordination/installation are now decided by the local governing body (either a church – for Ruling Elders and Deacons - or presbytery – for Teaching Elders)
 - b. All ordinations/installations done by any governing body are done on behalf of the whole church (i.e., all of the PCUSA) and must be recognized as valid
 - c. Thus, if a governing body chooses to ordain and/or install an avowed atheist as a pastor, elder or deacon, they have the freedom to do so.

New citations ensuring the “full participation” of all members that can be used to ordain anyone, regardless of faith. Thus, it is now possible to ordain an avowed atheist if that governing body chooses. (again...emphasis is added)

F-1.0403 – Unity in Diversity

As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise (Gal. 3:27–29).

The unity of believers in Christ is reflected in the rich diversity of the Church’s membership. In Christ, by the power of the Spirit, God unites persons through baptism regardless of race, ethnicity, age, sex, disability, geography, or theological conviction. There is therefore no place in the life of the Church for discrimination against any person. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) shall guarantee full participation and representation in its worship, governance, and emerging life to all persons or groups within its membership. No member shall be denied participation or representation for any reason other than those stated in this Constitution.

G-20104b – Gifts and Qualifications

Standards for ordained service reflect the church’s desire to submit joyfully to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all aspects of life. The Council responsible for ordination and/or installation shall examine each candidate’s calling, gifts, preparation, and suitability for the responsibilities of ordered ministry...Councils shall be guided by Scripture and the confessions in applying standards to individual candidates.

** The “40,000 foot” implications of this new polity are numerous... three hypotheticals...

1. Presbytery/GA COULD take over (i.e., assume original jurisdiction over) Grace Community Church, removing its officers and pastors

2. Presbytery/GA could require GCC to forward any amount of our budget to that higher body.
3. Presbytery/GA could assume original jurisdiction over GCC and manage it however they choose...including selling the property without regard to the wishes of the majority of the local church.
 - a. Would this happen? Very unlikely...but possible since PCUSA polity gives unilateral control of the property to the presbytery
 - b. Even more troubling, if a congregation took a vote, the majority need not rule should the presbytery deem the minority as the “true church”

Re: the nFOG (new Form of Government) and property issues...(this language is similar to the old language – emphasis is added)

G-4.0207 – Property of Congregation in Schism

The relationship to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) of a congregation can be severed only by constitutional action on the part of the presbytery (G-3.0303b). If there is a schism within the membership of a congregation and the presbytery is unable to effect a reconciliation or a division into separate congregations within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the presbytery shall determine if one of the factions is entitled to the property because it is identified by the presbytery as the true church within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). *This determination does not depend upon which faction received the majority vote within the congregation at the time of the schism.*

So...

...for the last 16 months, your Session has been watching the trends/votes of the PCUSA...

...we have been listening to the communications of the General Assembly staff...

...we have been meeting with other churches in our presbytery – which represent more than half of the membership of our presbytery...

...and we have concluded that we will NOT be able to keep this issue from you, our church.

** Therefore, we are having these Community Forums to discuss these key issues (and any others) with you.