

On Being Presbyterian
Chapter 8 - “Decently and in Order: Presbyterian Government”

“Let all things be done decently and in order” – 1 Corinthians 14.40

PCA Book of Church Order (abbreviated: BCO or BOCO)

I. The Nature of Church Power: Spiritual

Spectrum of views on church authority:

- from very high (Roman Catholic Church) to very low (non-membership evangelicalism)

“[T]he church’s sphere of authority is spiritual because its mission and means are spiritual.” (p. 136)

Three ways the church exercises spiritual power or authority:

- (1) To declare doctrine
- (2) To order its worship, administer its sacraments, and govern its affairs
- (3) To discipline its members
 Matthew 18.15-18
 1 Corinthians 5.1-5

“[Church discipline’s] ends, so far as it involves judicial action, are the rebuke of offenses, the removal of scandal, the vindication of the honor of Christ, the promotion of the purity and general edification of the Church, and the spiritual good of offenders themselves.” (BCO 27-3)

The spiritual nature of the church’s authority means it is not to meddle in the affairs of the state.

“Synods and councils are to handle, or conclude nothing, but that which is ecclesiastical: and are not to intermeddle with civil affairs which concern the commonwealth, unless by way of humble petition in cases extraordinary; or, by way of advice, for satisfaction of conscience, if they be thereunto required by the civil magistrate.”

(Westminster Confession of Faith, 31.4)

II. The Source of Church Power: Jesus Christ

“The church’s authority comes directly to it from the Lord Jesus Christ.” (p. 137)

Matthew 28.18-20

Ephesians 1.22-23

“Within the province of the Church, the Lord Jesus Christ is the only Teacher, Lawgiver, and Judge. If doctrine is taught, it is taught because he has revealed; if ordinances are administered, they are administered in his name, and because they are his; if government is established and exercised, it is through his appointment and authority; if saving grace is dispensed, it is dispensed through the virtue and

power of his Spirit; if a blessing is communicated, it is because he blesses.”
(James Bannerman)

“Jesus as head of the church is the source of its authority, and he alone can bind the conscience by his Word.” (p. 138)

III. The Law and Limits of Church Power: The Word of God

2 Timothy 3.16-17

1 Timothy 3.15

“Certainly, there are many particular rules and laws laid down in Scripture that teach about how the church’s government, worship, and doctrine are to be ordered. Not only that, but there are also examples throughout Scripture that are normative for understanding how we are to exercise the church’s authority. And when there are not explicit precepts and examples, there are enough general principles – whether they are ‘expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture’ – to discern what God would have us do (WCF 1.6).” (p. 139)

IV. Those Entrusted With Church Power: Officers

Ephesians 4.7-12

“All church power is granted to officers through the call of Jesus Christ, which comes by the consent of the church.... [T]he authority to preach the gospel and administer the sacraments comes through a call issued by a local church and by powers granted by a presbytery. No one takes it upon himself to preach or administer the sacraments without proper authorization from a presbytery or without invitation from a session.” (p. 141)

“Power of ‘jurisdiction’ (the right and power to interpret and apply the law) is exercised by officers jointly as church courts.” (p. 141)

Local Church Session – Presbytery – [Synod] – General Assembly

Two sets of officers:

(1) Elders (Gk. = *presbuteros*)

“It belongs to those in the office of elder ... to watch diligently over the flock committed to his charge, that no corruption of doctrine or of morals enter therein. They must exercise government and discipline, and take oversight not only of the spiritual interests of the particular church, but also the Church generally when called thereunto. They should visit the people at their homes, especially the sick. They should instruct the ignorant, comfort the mourner, nourish and guard the children of the Church. They should set a worthy example to the flock entrusted to their care by their zeal to evangelize the unconverted and make disciples.... They should pray with and for the people, being careful and diligent in seeking the fruit of the preached Word among the flock.” (BCO 8-3)

Two orders within one class: Ruling elders and Teaching elders
 1 Timothy 5.17
 Qualifications → 1 Timothy 3.1-7

(2) Deacons

“It is the duty of deacons to minister to those who are in need, to the sick, to the friendless, and to any who may be in distress. It is their duty also to develop the grace of liberality in the members of the church, to devise effective methods of collecting the gifts of the people, and to distribute these gifts among the objects to which they are contributed. They shall have the care of the property of the congregation, both real and personal, and shall keep in proper repair the church edifice and other buildings belonging to the congregation.... In the discharge of their duties the deacons are under the supervision and authority of the Session.”

(BCO 9-2)

Qualifications → 1 Timothy 3.8-13

V. The Connectional Nature of the Church

“A *church session* consists of teaching and ruling elders of a local congregation who have been called by Christ through the election of God’s people to exercise oversight in that congregation. A *presbytery* consists of ‘all the teaching elders and churches within its bounds that have been accepted by the presbytery.’ When the presbytery meets as a court, it comprises all the teaching elders and ruling elders elected by the session to represent the church (BCO 13-1). The *General Assembly*, the highest court of the church, represents in one body all the churches of the denomination (BCO 14-1). When elders gather together as a church court, they have power to declare in their ministry only what God has already said in his Word in the areas of doctrine, order, and discipline.”

Church power is *ministerial* and *declarative*.

“In Presbyterianism, the parts are in the whole and the whole is in the parts.”

- “All of the courts of the church are essentially equal in power.”
- “Each higher court has responsibility for the actions of the lower court.”
[review and control]
- “The parts of the church have the right of appeal to the whole.”
- “Each church has a responsibility to other parts and to the whole.”

(pp. 144-145)

Recommended Resources

PCA Book of Church Order on-line: www.pcaac.org/resources/bco/

Book on Church Government: Guy Prentiss Waters, *How Jesus Runs the Church*