

WHAT IS CHURCH GOVERNMENT?

by Sean Michael Lucas

TO THE GROUP LEADER: This resource is designed to help you lead others to better understand one of the "Basics of the Faith" booklets published by P&R. The numbers in brackets indicate the page number in the booklet. Below each question is an answer based on what the author presents, or advice on how to discuss the question. You have the freedom to adapt the questions to best fit your group.

A good teaching technique is to distribute the questions to the group and have them write down how they would answer BEFORE reading the booklet. After reading, members can refine their answers based on their reading. As a group, members can discuss their views to affirm or modify what they wrote.

1. To get started: What is your understanding of the following words? (5-6)

Presbyterian -

Get the interest of the class started by allowing them, briefly, to share what they wrote for these three terms before they read the booklet.

Elder-

The elder and deacon will be covered later in the study on pages 19-22.

Deacon -

2. As we think about the topic of church government, we must start at the top. Who is the head of the church? (6-8)

The only answer to this is Jesus. Some in the group might answer it is the pastor. Others, with a Presbyterian background, might answer the presbytery or the General Assembly. Quickly dispel this error by pointing everything to Christ as the only Head of the church. Have someone read Eph.5:23.

3. Again, if we are going to discuss church government, what is meant by "the Church?" (8-13)

Dr. Lucas gives a lot of detail in this section. Be sure you are clear on all he has said. We might even see the church in these three ways: The first is made up of all the saints, past present and future (which includes us); the next is the church as it exists all around the world today, of which we are a part; the third is the local church body in which we fellowship and worship.

4. Is **everyone** who is a member of a local church today genuinely saved?

We don't have to look far to see people who can give a great testimony of how they came to Christ, but when you look at their lives, and the lack of any spiritual fruit, we have to wonder. But, thankfully, Christ is their judge, not us. Each will answer to Him, not us. But when we see someone who shows no fruit, we have the right, and obligation, to lovingly approach them about where they stand.

5. Can you think of three ways Jesus delegated His authority in and through the Church (other than the people in leadership)? (13-18)

We know of Jesus' authority because we have His Word, which is our ultimate authority for our faith and how we live. From this point, go over the three areas covered by Dr. Lucas.

6. How do you understand the role of the ruling elders, the teaching elder(s), and the deacons? What is the level of authority of each? (19-22)
Spend a good amount of your time on this section as it is often the most misunderstood, and sometimes mismanaged, part of the church, and can cause many problems. It would also be helpful to go through the requirements of an elder and a deacon found in 1 Tim.3:1-13 and Titus 1:5-9.
7. Since we are part of a Presbyterian denomination, what do you understand to be the role of a church's session, the presbytery, and the General Assembly? (23-25)
Before you go over these roles, take the group through a short study of why the Jerusalem Council was called to meet in Acts 15. Explain why this event was so significant.
8. Your local church may be in great shape today, but what about 5 to 10 years from now? Suppose your pastor (who has done a great job of shepherding your flock, along with the elders) moves on. How can you know for sure your church will always have a leadership which will stand true to our Presbyterian form of government and our biblical standards? (25-28)
We can never know any of this with absolute certainty. Satan is always at work to destroy the true works of God. The beauty of our system is the pastor is directly under the authority of his presbytery, and as such, if he begins to teach things which are out of accord with the Bible and our Westminster Standards, he will be either disciplined by the presbytery, or, if necessary, removed from that pulpit. This is done in order to insure we maintain the peace and the purity of the church.

After going through these questions, read the text and fill in the answers in preparation for class, noting other questions you might have. [By the way, if you do have any other questions about what you read, write them down here so you remember them at class time.]

APPLICATION

When an elder (ruling or teaching) takes his oath, he promises to maintain the peace and the purity of the church. To this end we read:

Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.... Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you. (Hebrews 13:7,17-18)

With this in mind, would you, individually, and you, as a group, commit to pray *regularly* for the leaders of your church and denomination? They need your prayers! The world, the flesh, and the devil are all working to make your leaders fall. When they fall, or even falter, the church (you) suffers severely. Think of how much it would mean to them to know there are those in the church who care enough to be committed to pray for them consistently.

For Further Study

On Being Presbyterian: Our Beliefs, Practices, and Stories, Sean Michael Lucas. P&R, 2006.
Biblical Church Government, Don K. Clements. Metokos Press, 2005.

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