

# **Well Ordered, Living Well**



# Well Ordered, Living Well

*A Field Guide to  
Presbyterian Church Government*

Guy Prentiss Waters



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*Well Ordered, Living Well*

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## PREFACE

I count it a small victory that you are reading this preface. Books on church government do not rank high on Christian bestseller lists. The fact that you have made it this far says something.

Biblical church government is many things. At its best, it reflects a commitment to the Bible as the infallible, inerrant Word of God. The Bible speaks to a high view of the sovereignty and majesty of God. It exalts the free grace of God in the gospel of Christ. It cherishes worship that is biblical and reverent. And it prescribes a form of church government—rule by elders.

This book is a brief and nontechnical introduction to biblical church government. It is written with the nonspecialist in mind. If you have never been to seminary, and even if you think you may never serve as a church officer, this book is for you.

I hope that you will see that we all need church government to live our Christian lives well. We all need to know a little bit about church government to make the most of our Christian life, especially as we live in community with our fellow believers. This book is designed to equip you with some

of the basics—to answer questions you may always have had, or to answer questions you may never have thought to ask. My hope is that, once you're done, you'll be more appreciative of your church and your leaders and, above all, rejoice in the Lord and be thankful to Him.

I am writing as someone who is persuaded that Presbyterianism is the form of government that most closely captures biblical church government. Some of you may come from churches whose government traces its roots to the Church Order of Dort. There is a lot of overlap between Presbyterianism and Dortian church polity. There are a few differences as well. Pastor Bartel Elshout has kindly authored an appendix to this book. In it he briefly, clearly, and accessibly shows what Presbyterianism and Dortian church polity have in common, and where the two are distinct from one another. I am especially grateful for the fraternal spirit of Pastor Elshout's comparative discussion.

I wish to extend particular thanks to Kevin Vollema, who has read through the work and offered helpful editorial comments along the way. I am particularly thankful to Wayne Sparkman, Director of the PCA Historical Center, who went above and beyond in tracking down information on the historical origin of the questions for membership in the Presbyterian Church in America.

Portions of chapters 2 and 3 were presented in various settings over the last couple of years. I am grateful to the Brandon Presbyterian Church, Brandon, Mississippi; the Houston Area Reformed Fellowship, Houston, Texas; the Pear Orchard Presbyterian Church, Ridgeland, Mississippi; and the Second Presbyterian Church, Yazoo City, Mississippi,

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I am grateful to Reformed Theological Seminary, where I have the privilege of serving as a professor on the Jackson campus. I look forward every year to teaching my classes on the church and church government. I am grateful to our board of trustees; to our chancellor, Ligon Duncan; to our provost, Robert J. Cara; and to my academic dean, Miles V. Van Pelt, for making it possible for me to serve through teaching and writing.

I am also grateful to my presbytery, the Presbytery of the Mississippi Valley (PCA). It is all privilege to serve with and alongside her congregations and elders. They exhibit, in teaching and in life, the very best of biblical church government.

I came into the Reformed and Presbyterian church as a brand-new believer. I am grateful to the congregations of which I was a part in the first decade or so of my Christian life. They helped me not only to understand what biblical church government is but also to see it lived out in the lives of men and women. It is to those congregations, with gratitude to the triune God, that this book is affectionately dedicated.



## WHY DOES CHURCH GOVERNMENT MATTER?

Government is not what you would call popular these days. On the political right, many fear that the growth, spread, and reach of government will deprive citizens of core freedoms. On the political left, many fear that the rise of charismatic leaders across the world will shatter global norms and values. We live in a day when one of the few areas of agreement across the political spectrum is that government should be held at arm's length.

When it comes to the church, government often isn't at the top of anyone's list of priorities. The church should preach the Word, evangelize the lost, train up disciples, help the needy—on this most Christians would agree. But church government? How could something so impersonal and bureaucratic be critical to the Spirit-indwelt body of Christ? And hasn't church government done a lot of harm? How many churches have needlessly split? How many pastors have unfairly lost their jobs? How many people have been wrongfully removed from membership? How many unbiblical decisions have been made—and all because of church government?

So, yes, we have an uphill climb ahead of us. But church government *does* matter. Not because of tradition (though we

are not the first to think about these things). Not because of expediency. (Things *do* have to get done in the church, after all. The building's electricity bill won't pay itself.) But because of the Bible. We believe that church government matters because the Bible says that it matters.

That's our focus in this chapter. We simply want to see that the Bible cares about church government. We are not even going to look at the details of biblical church government (that's the next couple of chapters). We want to show that you can't talk about the church and the Christian life without bringing in church government. More than that, church government is not a ball and chain around our ankles. It is not God's punishment for our sins. It is the good gift of our good God to His people. He gives us just what we need. And we need church government.

We are going to see five reasons why we need the government that God gives His church in the Bible. It is *our expectation* that the church would have some form of government. It is because of *our need* as Christians that God has given us government for the church. The character of *our God* helps us to see why we have church government. The work of *our Savior*, Jesus Christ, points us to the need for government among His people. And, finally, the identity and needs of *our people*, the church, help us to see why God has provided us a government in the Scripture. So, let's take a look at these five reasons, one by one.

### **Our Expectation**

First, it is *our expectation* that the church would have some form of government. Why would this be? It is because

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government is a part of the fabric of the lives of human beings. Our first introduction to government is in the family. Older writers used to speak of “family government.” This quaint phrase simply describes the way that the Bible assigns roles to husbands, wives, and children to ensure that the family is functional and safe. Imagine a home where there are no rules. Sounds good, doesn’t it? Until you think about what life would be like. Put yourself in the place of a child. She must fend for herself to find food in the pantry for all her meals. No adult sets a bedtime for her. She simply falls asleep whenever she wants. She comes and goes as she wishes. There are no curfews. No parent makes sure she gets to school. No one takes the time to teach her right from wrong. Now it doesn’t sound so good, does it? A friend of mine taught in a school where a number of the children came from homes not too different from the one I have just described. I am so glad that she was there to help provide some order and structure to these kids’ lives. But it was hard work—and heartbreaking work. The home should be a place where we experience the loving care, instruction, and discipline of a mother and father. It should be a place where we learn that loving authority helps us to grow and to mature, where we have the structure, support, and encouragement to use our gifts for the good of others and for the glory of God. When that’s in place, it’s easy not to notice. When it’s absent, it’s painfully obvious.

Or, think of the state. Would you want to live in a society that was in a state of complete anarchy? Could you even imagine what such a place would be like? Perhaps you have traveled to places with poor government. Electricity is unreliable, and the water is unsafe to drink. Roads are impassable.

The police are unreliable and even frightening. Taxes are tantamount to confiscation. Even so, that would be far better than living in anarchy—no government, no laws, no checks or restraints on evil. In fact, we would be hard pressed to think of a society, culture, or nation in human history that had no government at all. Forms of government vary. There is monarchy, autocracy, oligarchy, plutocracy, and democracy. There are republics—democratic and socialistic. There is communism. But there is *something*. Human beings need government to coordinate the human and material resources of a people, to restrain and punish evil within a nation's borders, and to protect it from threats that come from outside its borders.

Even recreational clubs, athletic teams, and civic associations have government. They have bylaws, rules of order, terms of membership, dues, penalties, organized meetings, officers, committees, and so on. They have these things because they couldn't do their work, or do it nearly as well, without them.

What does all this have to do with church government? If families, nations, and clubs have government, why wouldn't the church have some form of government? If the church is a society gathered for some set purpose (as are families, nations, and clubs), wouldn't we expect God to have set in place some form of government? If other human societies need government to steer resources and deter wrongdoing, would the church be any exception?

Notice that we have not yet made direct appeal to the Bible. We are simply arguing that when we think about the church, we presume that it will have some orderly form of government. This is so because in other spheres of the world



that God has made, we everywhere encounter government. Government is part of what it means to live together as image-bearers in God's world.

### **Our Need**

Second, it is because of *our need* as Christians that God has given us government for the church. Imagine (or maybe you don't have to imagine this) two godly men at your church. They are pillars of the faith, examples to the flock, faithful servants, and they have an ugly, public disagreement. It is only a matter of days before the whole church knows about it and begins to talk about it. Soon, it is the talk of the town.

What can be done when something like that happens? To think about that biblically, we need to begin with what the Scriptures say about who Christians are. Every true Christian is united to Christ and indwelt by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:9–11). Among the “fruit of the Spirit,” Paul tells us, is “self-control” (Gal. 5:22–23). God has given us “a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control” (2 Tim. 1:7 ESV). It is the ministry of the Spirit that enables us to live “self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age” (Titus 2:12 ESV). By the enabling power of the Holy Spirit, we are able to say “no” to sin and “yes” to holiness (Rom. 6:13; 8:13). In this way, we are being conformed more and more after the image of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 3:18).

Paul was a pastor, and he knew very well that believers need all the help that they can get. This is part of the reason why God never intended for us to live the Christian life in isolation from other believers. When you read the New Testament (and the Old Testament, for that matter), every

Christian that you meet is in a pattern or network of relationships with other Christians. The God who made us to live in families, towns, cities, and nations has redeemed us to live as members of His people. That is why the New Testament can describe the church as a family, a commonwealth, and a kingdom (Eph. 2:19; Phil. 3:20; Rev. 1:6).

Our relationship with fellow believers is important for many reasons. For one thing, it is in the context of these relationships that God removes sin from our lives and leads us in the way of holiness. That's what any good relationship should do. I have had many young men tell me over the years that they had no idea how sinful they were until they got married and began living in the same home with their new wife. Relationships expose sin and give us opportunities to grow in grace.

This is especially true in the church. Think of all the “one another” commands we find in the letters of the New Testament. In writing to the Ephesians, Paul tells us to bear “with *one another* in love” (4:2), reminds us that we are “members of *one another*” (v. 25), and exhorts us to “be kind to *one another*, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you” (v. 32). We are to address “*one another* in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs” (5:19) and submit “to *one another* in the fear of God” (v. 21). We can't fulfill these commands in solitude. We fulfill them in relationship with other believers. It is here that we do the hard work of “walk[ing] in the Spirit” (Gal. 5:25).

This relational work is all the more important when we don't think and live in ways that are pleasing to God. What happens when we fail to bear the fruit of self-control?

Thankfully, God does not leave us to ourselves. One of the things that He does is to raise up believers in the church to admonish us. That is why Paul writes, “Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness” (Gal. 6:1). Paul tells the Roman Christians that they are “full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, able also to admonish one another” (Rom. 15:14). God fills us with knowledge and grace so that we can help wandering brothers and sisters.

This is a work that takes place all the time, often quietly, in the body of Christ. Many times these sorts of encounters and interactions lead to repentance and prayerful watchfulness. Perhaps you can think of a time when a Christian friend pulled you aside to express concern about something he had seen in your life. You were grieved and humbled and went to the Lord for forgiveness and mercy in Christ. You are much more vigilant about that area of your life now than you ever were before. You know your friend loves you, prays for you, and is happy to offer counsel, encouragement, and accountability. This is the grace of the Holy Spirit in your life.

But, sadly, people sometimes respond even to the gentlest of admonitions with resistance. What happens then? Jesus foresaw this and planned for this. He has put elders in the church to serve as shepherds of the flock (1 Peter 5:2). Part of their work is to admonish the flock (Acts 20:31; 1 Thess. 5:12). This work of discipline is hard and often unpleasant work, as any elder will tell you. But it is necessary. And it is commanded by Christ. When He taught about the church, Jesus provided for formal discipline by the officers of the church (Matt. 18:15–20). In the Great Commission,

He commands the apostles (and elders after them) to teach disciples “to *observe* all things that I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:20)—a command that surely implies discipline when people in the church fail to observe Jesus’s commands. We see examples of this discipline even within the ministry of the apostle Paul (1 Cor. 5:1–13; 2 Thess. 3:6–13).

Such discipline becomes necessary when a Christian has failed to discipline himself. Formal discipline is not the vengeful punishment of an unreconciled God. It is the severe mercy of a grieved Father reclaiming a wandering child. But this stage of discipline is only one stage of discipline. We should think of discipline as beginning with ourselves. Discipline is also the concern of our closest brothers and sisters in our local churches. In a more formal fashion it is the concern of the undershepherds of Christ, who will have to “give account” for the souls under their care (Heb. 13:17). Seen in this light, we need church government. We need church government if we are going to survive and thrive in the Christian life.

## **Our God**

Third, the character of *our God* helps us to see the need for church government. Perhaps you have visited a church or have been a member of a church where it seemed like you had stepped into the Wild West. Worship is disorganized, even chaotic. Leadership is absent or checked out. People are looking for the door.

You know instinctively that this is not the way the church is supposed to be. Why is that? One main reason has to do with who our God is. What kind of God is God? He

is not a God “of confusion but of peace” (1 Cor. 14:33). He is a God who would have us do all things “decently and in order” (v. 40).

We see this from the opening verses of the Bible. What is creation but God making the world of nothing and then bringing order out of chaos? God even appeals to the fixed order of the creation to assure us that His covenant promises are true and will never fail (Jer. 31:35–37).

When God redeems sinners, He places them in a people. This people is a family at first. And one of Abraham’s responsibilities is to ensure that his house is ordered in a way that is pleasing to God (Gen. 18:19). When the family becomes a nation, God orders their life with a covenant, given through Moses (Ex. 19:1–16). He gives them laws to structure their life together. There are laws concerning the tabernacle, the festivals, sacrificial offerings, priests, Levites, tithes, ritual purity, and cleansing—God doesn’t leave the details of His worship to our imagination! There are laws that provide job descriptions for kings and judges. God provides laws regulating real estate, taxes, legal disputes, and agriculture; laws concerning marriage, divorce, remarriage, and inheritance; laws concerning sexual offenses, theft, bodily injury, and perjury; laws concerning what do with the peoples remaining in Canaan, and laws concerning warfare with peoples outside of Canaan. And the list goes on.

While these civil and ceremonial laws no longer govern the lives of God’s people under the new covenant, God does order our life. We should not think that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost is a license to toss structure out the window. We do not have to choose between

ardor and order. As Edmund P. Clowney rightly says, “the Spirit of ardor is also the Spirit of order.”<sup>1</sup>

This is on clear display in 1 Corinthians 14. Corinthian worship was, to put it mildly, chaotic. Paul has to step in and lay down firm rules for the Corinthians (vv. 26–35). These rules follow a few main principles—“let all things be done for edification” (v. 26); “for God is not the author of confusion but of peace” (v. 33); “let all things be done decently and in order” (v. 40). Edification, peace, decency, order—those are the trademarks of the work of the Holy Spirit in the new covenant church.

These principles apply not only to the church’s worship but also to its government. In the book of Acts, it is striking to see how disorderly gatherings or assemblies of unbelievers can be. When unbelief attacks Christian missionaries, how often is it through unruly mobs (Acts 14:19; 17:5, 6, 13)? Luke tells us that a mob even filled the streets of Ephesus, spilling into the theater. (You can visit the ruins of Ephesus and the theater today and get a hint of what it must have been like.) Luke, in his understated way, tells us that “the whole city was filled with confusion” and “most of them did not know why they had come together” (19:29, 32). It takes a stern rebuke and threat from the town clerk to calm and disperse the crowd (vv. 35–41).

Contrast these gatherings with the assemblies of Christians in Acts. Now, Luke is no romanticizer. He is not giving us the early church through rose-colored glasses. They had their flaws and disagreements, and these are on open display

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1. Edmund P. Clowney, *The Church* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1995), 115.

in the Acts of the Apostles. But the church was an orderly society. One of the greatest threats to the unity of the church was a corruption of the gospel that sought to require circumcision for salvation (15:1–5). The church resolved this crisis in an orderly way—through a regional council of elders, no less!—and the blessed outcome was greater unity, strengthened faith, and increased numbers (16:1–5).

The church's government is in action when it sets apart men to preach the gospel (13:1–3). It is in action when it resolves deep theological disputes (15:1–35). It is in action when it provides for the needy among God's people (6:1–6). It is in action when it equips and encourages the elders for the work of ministry (20:17–35). The orderly life and work of the church don't just happen. The Spirit brings them about, to be sure. But He does so through the means of the government that He has given to God's people. God is a God of order, and that means He has given a government to the church.

### **Our Savior**

Fourth, the work of *our Savior*, Jesus Christ, points to the need for government among His people.

Monarchies are rare in the West today. The few royal houses that remain are mostly ceremonial, mere shadows of their former power and sway. They provide gossip for the papers and fodder for entertainment, but often seem to do little else. But there is one monarchy that spans the globe and will endure through the ages—the reign of Jesus Christ over His church. His reign is not ceremonial or trivial. It is real and active.

In the fullness of time, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, took on our humanity and came into this world to do a work that His Father had given Him to do (Gal. 4:4; Rom. 8:3–4; John 5:30). That work, of course, was to live a life of perfect obedience that would result in His death on the cross, after which He was powerfully raised from the dead. He did this to save all those sinners whom His Father had given Him from before the foundation of the world (John 6:37, 39, 44).

Jesus did not cease working when He entered into glory. Hebrews helps us to see His ongoing priestly intercession on our behalf (Heb. 7:25; 8:2; 9:24). Jesus Christ is also our heavenly Prophet, who has given us His Word, the Bible (Heb. 1:1–2). But Christ is not only our Prophet and our Priest, He is also our King. When we say that Christ is our King, we mean more than that He is sovereign over the works of His hands as the second person of the Godhead. We mean that, from His throne of glory, the risen and ascended Christ rules over all things for the sake of His people for whom He died (Eph. 1:20–22). Those sinners whom He has redeemed by His own blood are gathered into the “kingdom of the Son of [the Father’s] love” (Col. 1:13–14).

That means the one we call “Savior” we call “Lord” in the same breath. Peter, in particular, loves to speak of Jesus as “our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 1:11; 2:20; 3:18; see also 3:2). We cannot have Jesus as Savior if we are unwilling to have Him as our Lord. The Christian who has been justified by grace, Paul argues, must regard Christ as Lord in his or her thinking, willing, feeling, and doing (Rom. 6:1–23).

While Jesus is the Lord of every individual Christian, His lordship extends to the whole number of His people.



His reign extends to His *church*. If Jesus is King, where is His kingdom? His kingdom is not a place or territory, like France, Ethiopia, or Brazil. His kingdom is found wherever His people are (Matt. 16:19; Col. 1:13; Rev. 1:6). Jesus is presently building and extending His kingdom, whenever His ministers preach the gospel in His name (Acts 20:25; see also Rom. 10:14–18). One day the “kingdoms of this world” will “become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ” (Rev. 11:15). For the present, we see the kingdom in the existence and the life of the church (Col. 1:13; see also 1 Cor. 4:20; Rom. 14:17).

If Christ is King and we, His church, are His kingdom, how does He rule us? The New Testament is absolutely clear that He is not an absentee ruler. He is actively, personally reigning over His beloved church. But He is not here on earth to do that in person. So, how does He do it? He has given us a government on the pages of His Word, the Bible. He rules us by the power of the Holy Spirit and through the officers whom He has gifted, called, and sent into His church to be servant-rulers of His people.

Paul vividly brings this point home in Ephesians 4:1–16. The risen and ascended Christ has entered into glory. In the manner of a victorious and loving king, He bestows gifts on His subjects. These gifts are the “apostles,” the “prophets,” the “evangelists,” and the “pastors and teachers” (Eph. 4:11). Their work is to minister the Word to the saints so that they will be equipped “for the work of ministry” and so that the “body of Christ” will be built up (v. 12). God’s people are built up by speaking to one another the truth that they have been taught (v. 15). This will continue until Christ returns, the day when