

David W. Long, Pastor
Reformed Presbyterian Church
Lord's Day Morning
September 28, 2008
'Doctrines That Will Change Your Life' Series
#6

"Presbyterian is Not a Bad Word"

Acts 15:1-35

Introduction

Quite a few years ago we had a man coming to the church who encouraged the Session to change the name of our church. He didn't have a particular suggestion other than *anything that doesn't have the word presbyterian in it*. When we asked him why, he said that people had recommended our church to him many times but he always resisted coming because in the evangelical circles he ran in everybody considered presbyterian to be equal with a liberal, social gospel and a rejection of the Bible. He was shocked to learn otherwise and believed that a name change would boost our membership.

We didn't take him up on his suggestion, however, I have to agree with him that there is a lot of confusion around the word presbyterian. I have conversations with people all of the time that assume presbyterian is the name of a denomination. They say things like *Oh, I went to the Presbyterian church growing up*. Most of you here today understand that Presbyterianism is a form of church government. Our goal today is to see the beauty of Presbyterian. God has given us this kind of government for the peace, purity and protection of the church. Without good church government the church is subject to all kinds of attacks and errors.

[Acts 15:1-35]

The word *Presbyterian* comes from the Greek word *presbuteros* which means elder. In its simplest definition Presbyterian is church government through elders.

- Elders are chosen by the people of God. Their function is to shepherd the people of God in local congregations. They do it by leading in the teaching of the Word, counseling those in need, casting vision and direction of the ministry, bringing comfort to the afflicted and discipline to the wandering.
- These local congregations are gathered geographically into groups called *presbyteries* where the collective elders from each congregation oversee the ministries of the local elders and give a court of appeal to any errors or problems at the local level.
- The highest group in Presbyterian government is called the Synod or sometimes the General Assembly. This would be a little bit like the Supreme Court. The Synod is the final court of appeal for problems. That body also solidifies the doctrinal positions of the entire church.

Some of the key passages for Presbyterian church government are:

- Acts 15 – Like an early Synod meeting. Dealing with a significant doctrinal issue important to the whole church.
- I Timothy 3 – Gives the qualifications for an elder. (Read before our elder election on Saturday night.)
- I Peter 5; I & II Timothy; Titus – Address the duties of an elder.

Presbyterian government is not the only type of church government. Some denominations are set

up in the form of a hierarchy. Their system is a little bit like a business corporation. President, vice presidents, directors, and supervisors. It's a top down system. The higher up the chain you go the more authority is vested in the person with the title.

Other churches are congregational. All of the leadership and authority reside in the local congregation. There is no connectedness or formal authority or accountability outside of the local church.

Now, before I lose some of you, let me say that I know for some of you, a discussion on church government is about as interesting as watching paint dry. (For others of you, it energizes you and gets you excited.) But there is an important *so what* to the doctrine of church government. And the truth is, the better we understand our church government, the more we will be able to live in peace and unity. And the more thankful we will be for God's design and love for His church. It's important for us, since we are Presbyterians, to think and act like Presbyterians. So what difference does it make that we are Presbyterian?

1. It Gives Protection.

It's not infallible protection. One of the reasons Presbyterians have a bad name is because some of the largest Presbyterian denominations in the world have abandon the gospel. So Presbyterianism alone is not enough. But having said that, it offers the best protection.

In our passage this morning the church was faced with a huge controversy. What was at the heart of controversy? Some, as you can see in verse 1, were arguing that *unless you are circumcised you cannot be saved*. In other words, to become a Christian, some were saying, you had to first become a Jew. Faith was not alone sufficient,

there were additional requirements. To this teaching Paul and Barnabas took great exception and great dissension entered into the church.

So verse 6 tells us that the apostles and the elders came together to look into the matter. First Peter reminded the elders of the way God brought the gospel to the Cornelius and directed Peter of His plans to bring salvation to the Gentiles. Then Paul and Barnabas illustrated how signs and wonders from God had been accomplished among the Gentiles through their mission work. Then James opened the Word of God and showed from the Old Testament that this is exactly what God had promised to do.

In the end they agreed with Peter's words in verse 11. *But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are.* And verse 19; *we (will not) trouble those turning to God from among the Gentiles.*

God protected the early church from heresy through the debate, discussion and wisdom of a plurality of elders. This was not a one man decision; nor was every congregation left to decide on their own. Their collective wisdom, as those called and set apart for the gospel ministry, helped them see clearly the things of God.

The motto of the U.S. Marine Corps is *semper fidelis*, which means *Forever Faithful*. That motto has shaped and driven the Marine Corps for many years. One of the mottos of the reformation has been *semper reformanda*, *Forever Reforming*. The heart of our desire as Presbyterians is to examine everything we believe by the Scriptures and to always be ready to die to ourselves and our thoughts so that we might live and be conformed to the truth of His Word. Presbyterian church government gives a forum for that kind of

reformation. It is built upon many elders studying, praying and discussing the Scriptures so that truth might be discovered and the church reformed.

2. It Builds Faith.

To think rightly about church government, we have to think rightly about the nature of the church. The church is spiritual in nature. The church has a unique and special relationship with Jesus Christ. The church is the bride of Christ. He has declared His love for the church and commitment to bring about her growth and purity. Jesus Christ owns the church in a way that expresses His nearness and zeal for her. Ephesians 5:25 and following says *Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless.*

Since we are in the middle of electing a president right now, we might be tempted to compare the church with civil government. But the nature and requirements for the church and the state are different.

The leaders in the church, the elders, are to be men of the Bible, men whose characters reflect the character of Jesus. The elder is to be a man of spiritual maturity whose life is controlled by Jesus Christ. His responsibility is first and foremost shepherding and teaching, not policy making. He is to care for the bride of Christ with the same love and compassion that Christ has.

This is critical, because those realities are designed to instill in the people of God a confidence and trust. In I Timothy 5 God tells the people of God to give double honor to the elders who rule well and

to not receive accusations against them unless they are substantiated by 2 or 3 witnesses. In Hebrews 13 the church is instructed to obey its leaders and submit to them in such a way that they will find joy in their work.

Now God says this, not because elders are perfect or infallible. In fact, He says it not because of the elders, but because of Himself. God wants us to trust Him. He wants us to grow in faith, that He is able to use those He calls to shepherd His precious bride, in such a way that He will be glorified and His will is done. Ephesians 4 teaches us that Christ Himself has given elders (pastors and teachers) to the church as a gift. He captured men and set them apart and gifted them to serve Him. So our confidence should be in Him.

There's a good illustration of the church learning this in Acts 11. Word had circulated throughout the church that the Cornelius a Gentile had become a Christian. The church was upset with Peter for allowing such a thing. But when he went before the church to explain what God had done, verse 18 says *When they heard this, they quieted down and glorified God, saying, "Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life."*

In politics our starting point is often distrust and scorn. In the church our starting point is to be trust and honor. If we believe that Jesus rules His church, then our faith will grow and we will trust Him to lead us.

- Protection
- Faith

3. It Produces Peace

Because we are Presbyterians and we believe that Christ will build His church through His appointed means, we can rest in the outcome of decisions as

they are made. The Word teaches that in the abundance of counselors there is much wisdom. So at every level of church government, whether it's the congregation electing an elder, the Session making a decision, the Presbytery counseling a congregation, or the Synod wrestling with a doctrinal issue, our goal should always be to discern the will of God. Our goal should never be to win our position. If we believe that God has ordained the process, then we can have peace in the end when He has led.

So let me give a couple of practical illustrations.

- Voting in Session meetings or Presbytery meetings. Can seem like elders never disagree. Not so. But when a decision is made, we believe that God has spoken. So we unite behind the decision and stand together. All of us have been on the "losing end" of a vote, and we've learned to trust one another and Christ.
- Elder election – Goal Saturday is not that your man wins, but that God raises up His man or men. Changing votes on 2nd or 3rd ballot is not an act of unfaithfulness, but can be an act of discernment, as long as you are voting for men you believe are qualified.
- In matters of doctrinal truth, there is no room for compromise, but there is a place for appeal. Most decisions are matters of application of the Word; issues of wisdom not doctrine.

Great protection, growing faith, peace – these are some of the fruits of presbyterian church government. Why is this important? Because Christ

died for the church. Heart of the cross is with His people. Through the church comes the redemption of the world. Let's thank God for His love and control over His church. May we always be faithful to follow Him.