

Form of Government of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church

Part 5 of 10

Plan for this morning:

- BRIEF REVIEW of the Principles of Presbyterian Government
- BRIEF review FG 1-11
- POST-CLASS QUESTIONS from last week on 10-11
- OVERVIEW of FG 12-19
- STUDY of FG 12-13
- QUESTIONS

REVIEW: Principles of Presbyterian government

Assembled from works of Dr. Edmund P. Clowney and Louis Berkhof

1. Christ is the only King and head of the church.
2. Christ alone is Lord of the conscience of his people in scripture.
3. Christ has endued his whole church with power.
4. Christ established special offices in the church for her edification.
5. The highest permanent *office* in the church is the preaching presbyter/minister.
6. The role of rule in the church is exercised jointly by ministers and rulers “of the people,” elders.
7. The principle of joint rule extends to the regional church and whole church.

Overall Plan for the Class: FG Main Topics

1. Foundational doctrinal commitments and principles for the government of Christ's church (FG I-IV)—September 8, 15, 29
2. The Special Offices (FG V-XI)—December 15; January 5
3. Assemblies (FG XII-XIX)—January 12 & 19
4. Ordination and Installation to Special Office (FG XX-XXVI)—April 27, May 4
5. Good Order in Miscellaneous Matters (FG XXVII-XXXII)—May 18

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REVIEW: Foundational doctrinal commitments and principles for the government of Christ's church (FG I-IV)

- FG 1—**Christ is King**: exalted; offices; word; Spirit
- FG 2—**Church**: visible kingdom; organized as congregations; work is worship, edification, and witness
- FG 3—**Power**: whole body; general office acknowledge special officers.
 - Ministerial and declarative
 - Moral and Spiritual
 - Christians are commanded to submit themselves to this government.
- FG 4—**Unity**: under Christ; under **special officers** of rule; discipline

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REVIEW: The Special Offices (FG V-XI)

- FG 5: **Offices** in the Church: New Covenant foundational special offices discontinued; NC **ordinary & perpetual** special offices
- FG 6: **Ministers**: **rule + stewardship in the gospel**; regional church membership
 - FG 7: Evangelists: particular gifts for evangelism/church planting
 - FG 8: **Pastors**: especially suited to congregational ministry of word and sacraments + shepherding/rule with elders in a **local church**
 - FG 9: Teachers: more suited to the seminary, school, or publication
- FG 10: **Elders**: apt to teach but the focus is really on **rule**
- FG 11: **Deacons**: serving and offering **leadership in mercy and mutual service** in the body

POST-CLASS QUESTIONS on 10-11

- Is Dr. Alan Strange's commentary on the FG controversial?
 - No, it's going to be published by the OPC.
 - Strange indicates in his commentary where there are important differences of opinion or debate within the OPC.
- Why did you stress that elders are not expected to be teachers?
 - Because it is a common misunderstanding in our circles.
 - It discourages men who are otherwise qualified to serve as an elder.
 - It sometimes leads congregations to assume that the "theology nerds" in the church ought to be the elders. Those men are not necessarily gifted in government.

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Assemblies (FG 12-19)

- FG 12—General Principles
- Specific Governing Assemblies
 - FG 13—The Local Church and Its Session
 - FG 14—The Regional Church and Its presbytery
 - FG 15—The Whole Church and Its General Assembly
- Congregations
 - FG 16—Congregational Meetings
 - FG 17—Congregations without Pastors
- Officers of Governing Assemblies
 - FG 18—Moderators
 - FG 19—Clerks

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Governing Assemblies

Chapter 12

All governing assemblies have the same kinds of rights and powers (12:1).

- All governing assemblies (session, presbytery, general assembly) have the same *kinds* of rights and powers.
- The *application* of those rights and powers differ, but the rights and powers are the same *kind*.
- So, we should not be thinking that the general assembly has greater power than a presbytery or that a presbytery has greater power than a local session.
 - They have different *spheres* and *roles*.
 - But the local session has the same *kind* of moral/spiritual power from Christ as the general assembly.

All governing assemblies have the same kinds of rights and powers (12:1).

- What is the kind of power that sessions, presbyteries, and the general assembly *all* have? What are the kinds of things that they all have power to do?
 - “... to maintain truth and righteousness...”
 - “...to oppose erroneous opinions and sinful practices that threaten the purity, peace, or progress of the church.”
 - “...to resolve questions of doctrine and discipline...”
 - “...to obtain evidence...” e.g.” ...called by any assembly to give testimony.”
 - “...to...inflict censures.”
 - “...only...the assembly having jurisdiction over...” a person can require that person to appear to be charged with an offense.

Each governing assembly exercises exclusive “original jurisdiction” over all matters belonging to it (12:2).

- “Jurisdiction”: “the official power to make legal decisions and judgments” (Oxford)
- “Original” = “first”
- Specified:
 - Session—local congregation
 - Presbytery—what is common to the ministers, sessions, and a regional church + appeal
 - General assembly—matters as concern the whole church + appeal

Each governing assembly exercises exclusive original jurisdiction over all matters belonging to it (12:2).

- Disputed matters refer to a higher governing assembly.
- Lower assemblies are subject to the review and control of higher assemblies.
- Sessions, presbyteries, and a general assembly are not independent but have a mutual relationship; *every* act of jurisdiction is the act of the whole church performed by it through the appropriate body.

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Assemblies have the authority to erect committees and commissions and to delegate to them specific interim powers (12:3).

From Strange:

- “Commissions are fully empowered to act, within the limits of their mandates, as the presbytery itself would act.” These are extremely rare in the OPC. “It was a commission of the Presbytery of New Brunswick [PCUSA] ...that tried Dr. Machen.”
- “Committees are more common in the OPC. Committees do not act as the body that they serve but bring recommendations to the body they serve.”
- Membership of a commission or committee can include non-assembly members—e.g. the diaconal committee of a presbytery.

Voting by proxy is not allowed in these assemblies (12:4).

- You have to be there!
- We don't think you should be able to vote without hearing and having opportunity to participate in any deliberation leading up to a vote.

The Local Church and Its Session

Chapter 13

The local church consists of a definite membership organized as a distinct congregation with its officers (FG XIII:1).

- So, a “local church” consists of all members *with its officers*. As an officer, the pastor is identified with the “local church” he serves, though his membership is in the regional church.
- Membership consists of communicant and noncommunicant members *on the roll*.
- The roll is very important. It determines who has “the privilege of pastoral oversight, instruction, and government by the church.”
- The session will give an account on the day of judgment for how they shepherded the church Jesus gave them charge of.

Hebrews 13:17

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.

A church consists of communicant and noncommunicant members; each is defined (FG XIII:2).

- Communicant members have made a “credible profession of faith in Christ.”
- Sessions aren’t (and should not be) trying to figure out whether someone is elect or regenerate. Only God knows that.
- Instead, a session by acquaintance, observation, and interview is determining whether a person’s profession [“I am a Christian”] is believable, or, as the FG puts it, “credible.”
- In the OPC, credible means affirming the truths and commitments of the membership vows in a way the session find believable.

A church consists of communicant and noncommunicant members; each is defined (FG XIII:2).

- It is common to also refer to “noncommunicant” members as “baptized” members. Of course, communicant members have been baptized, but noncommunicant members are members *solely by baptism*, not profession of faith.
- NOTE: noncommunicant members *are members!* It is not correct to say that they “become members” when they make profession of faith.

The officers in a local congregation are ministers, elders, and deacons, their quantity varying depending on the church (FG XIII:3).

- A congregation doesn't need more officers than it needs.
- No matter how many it needs, it shouldn't elect, ordain, and install any more than are qualified.

The officers in a local congregation are ministers, elders, and deacons, their quantity varying depending on the church (FG XIII:3).

- RF needs more officers.
 - Size of the congregation (7th largest OPC at the end of 2023)
 - Geographical spread of the congregation
- Why doesn't RF have more officers?
 - Do we actually lack men who are qualified?
 - Could qualified men be unwilling, distracted, or think they're unqualified?
 - Could it be that otherwise qualified men hold on to distracting "doctrines of men" that are "deal breakers"?

QUESTION: What do you think is the most common reason not to be willing to serve?

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QUESTION: What do you think is the most common reason not to be willing to serve?

I'm too busy.

The session consists of the pastor, other ministers, and ruling elders; it elects a moderator each year (FG XIII:4).

- The minister(s) are members of the session “in a sense.”
- It is more correct to say that a minister is permanently “commissioned” by presbytery to serve as a member of a session by installation.
- We just elected officers on Wednesday evening.
- Also, we elect a clerk each year—Jake is our new clerk!

Rules for convening a session and establishing a quorum are described (FG XIII:5).

- This is how many session members (and of what office) are necessary to conduct business as a session.
- Not going to go into the details.
- NOTE: a session can't be fewer than two officers, and one MUST be an elder.
 - This avoids episcopacy (ministers don't exercise rule apart from elders—the power of rule is *joint*).
 - This is consistent with the minister being a member of the regional church, a permanent member of presbytery, and a permanently *commissioned* member of the session.

Options for how a session can meet when the pastor is absent are described (FG XIII:6).

- Sometimes it makes sense to bring in a minister from another congregation to be present at and even moderate a session meeting.
- When a church is without a pastor, another minister temporarily serves as the “ministerial advisor.”
- In extraordinary circumstances, a session can meet without a minister, but the grounds for calling such a meeting must be reviewed at the next meeting a minister attends.

The responsibilities of the session are described (FG XIII:7).

- Oversee all matters concerning the conduct of public worship
- Arrange best measures for promoting spiritual growth and evangelistic witness
- Receive, dismiss, and exercise discipline over members of the church
- Supervise the activities of the diaconate, the board of trustees, and all other organizations of the congregation
- Have final authority over the use of the church property
- Appoint ruling elder commissioners to higher assemblies

The responsibilities of the session are described (FG XIII:7).

- Appoint ruling elder commissioners to higher assemblies
 - A *commissioner* is free to speak and follow his conscience in voting.
 - A *delegate* can be expected to vote in a certain way by the delegating body.
- So, just as elders are not “representatives of the people” (in the sense that their job isn’t to represent the opinions of the membership), so “commissioned” elders don’t serve at presbytery or general assembly with instructions from the session on what to say or how to vote.
- Christ alone is Lord of the conscience in his word.

The records a session is required to maintain are described (FG XIII:8).

- Minutes of meetings
- Minutes of meetings of the congregation
- Roll of members

Instructions for adding and removing names from the roll of members are summarized (FG XIII:9).

- This just mentions general contours.
- The details are spelled out in BD 2.B.2 & 3 that we spent a whole class on on November 27

Instructions for adding to or temporarily augmenting a session that has ceased to exist or become so small as to be ineffective are described (FG XIII:10).

- We call this “augmenting” a session.
- We have a few congregations in the presbytery with sessions that are augmented.
- There is a theme of too few elders in the OPC. It’s sad, and congregations suffer for it, and the small session suffers, too.

Local Church

[illegible]

Session – Standing Governing Assembly of a Local Church

[illegible]

Original Jurisdiction or “First Right to Rule” of a Session (over membership)

[illegible]

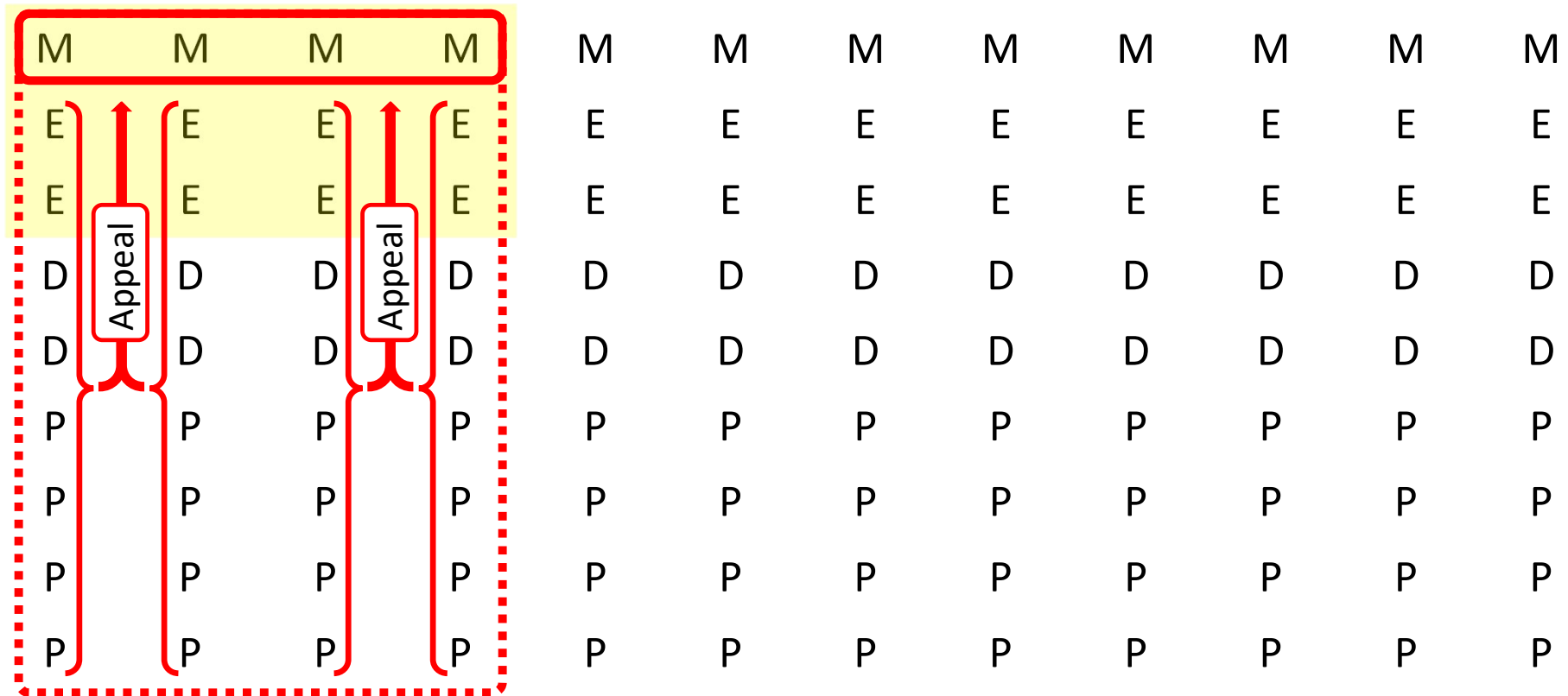
Regional Church

[illegible]

Presbytery – Standing Governing Assembly of a Regional Church

[illegible]

Original Jurisdiction or “First Right to Rule” of a Presbytery (over membership)



Whole Church

M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M
E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E
E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E
D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D
D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D
P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P
P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P
P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P
P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P

West Presbytery

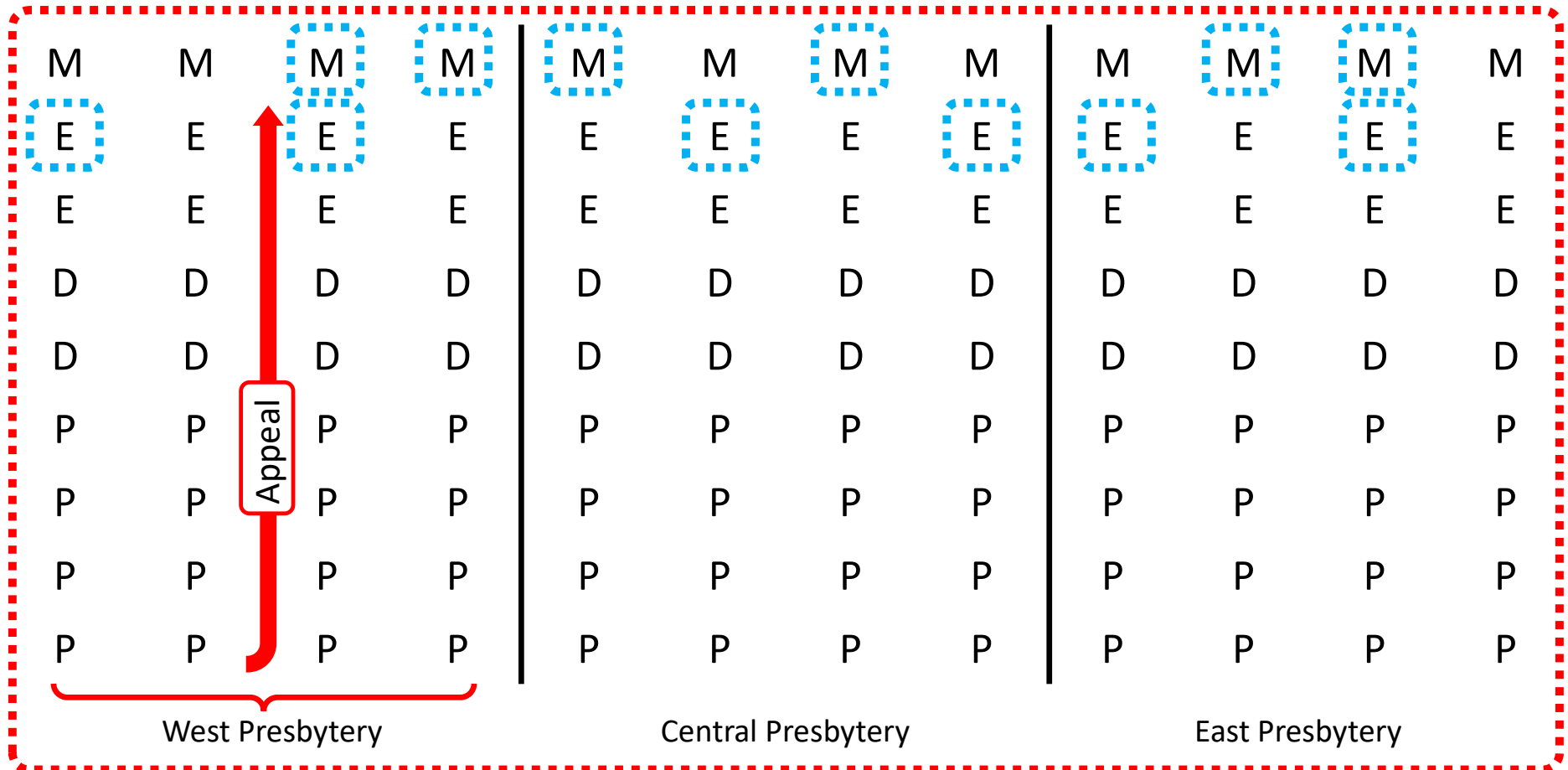
Central Presbytery

East Presbytery

General Assembly – Occasional Governing Assembly of the Whole Church

M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M
E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E
E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E
D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D
D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D
P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P
P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P
P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P
P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P
West Presbytery				Central Presbytery				East Presbytery			

Original Jurisdiction or “First Right to Rule” of a General Assembly (Note: No Membership)



Questions?