

PRESBYTERIANISM

The Marks and Polity of the PCS

INTRODUCTION

- Are we in a “Post-denominational” age, downplaying church distinctives?
- Presbyterians confess that outside of the church “There is no ordinary possibility of salvation” (WCF 25.2)
- God has given to the church “the ministry, oracles, and ordinances of the God, for the gathering and perfecting of the saints, in this life, to the end of the world” (WCF 25.3)
- Everything that is necessary for communion with God is found in Christ’s church

CHURCH IN TRINITARIAN TERMS

- “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. ¹⁰ Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy” (1 Pt 2:9-10)
- “Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³ For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink” (1 Cor 12:12-13)
- The church is to be filled with “the fullness of him who fills all in all” (Eph 1:7-23)

THE MARKS OF THE CHURCH

- To distinguish the “true” from the “false” church, Presbyterians note that “particular churches, which are members [of the universal church], are more or less pure, according as the doctrine of the gospel is taught and embraced, ordinances administered, and public worship performed more or less purely in them” (WCF 25.4)
- John Calvin claimed that “wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ’s institution, there, is not be doubted, a church of God exists” (*Inst.* 4.1.9)

METAPHORS OF THE CHURCH

- The church is a “body” (1 Cor 12:27; Eph 4:12-16)
- The church is a “bride” (Eph 5:22-23)
- The church is a “flock” (1 Pt 5:1-5)
- The church is a “household of God” (1 Tim 3:5), “a pillar and buttress of truth” (1 Tim 3:15)

THE CHURCH “INVISIBLE”

- Presbyterians confess that “the catholic or universal church, which is invisible, consists of the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the head; and is the spouse, the body, the fullness of him that filleth all in all” (WCF 25.1)
- Only God can see the true church in its entirety throughout space and time

THE CHURCH “VISIBLE”

- Presbyterians also confess that “the church, which is also catholic or universal under the gospel (not confined to one nation, as before under the law), consists of all those throughout the world that professed the true religion; and of their children” (WCF 25.2)
- Viewed from the human perspective, this is the church which we can see

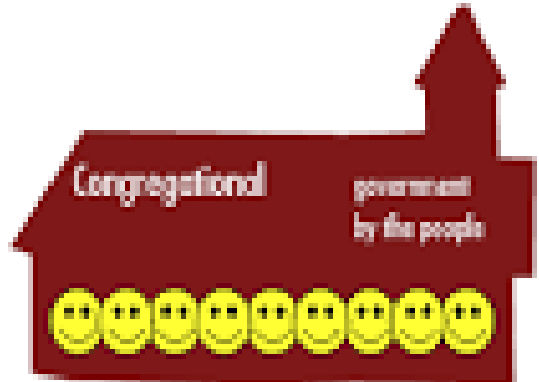
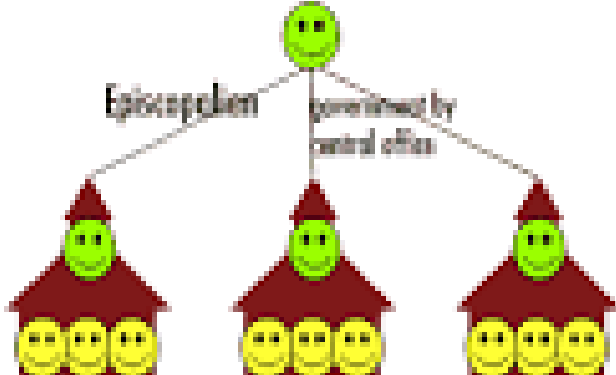
THE CHURCH “VISIBLE” AND “INVISIBLE”

- There are historical reasons why Presbyterians make this distinction
- Leading up to the Reformation, the RC Church argued that all those who are in good standing with the visible church—i.e., with the RC Church—were in good standing with God
- Rome merged the visible church with the church that only God can see so that the two were identified
- *extra Ecclesiam nulla salus* (outside the church there is no salvation)

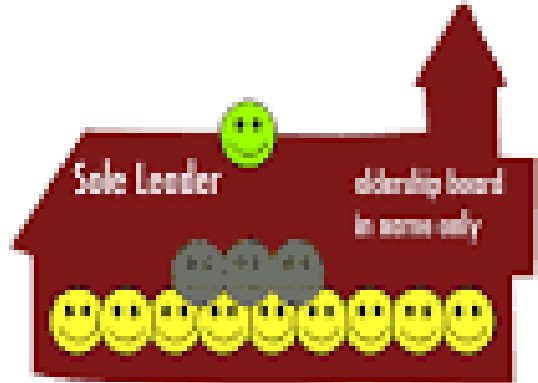
FORMS OF CHURCH POLITY

- “Episcopal” —having bishops and dioceses
- “Congregational” —having autonomous congregations
- “Presbyterial” —having elders but not priests or bishops

FORMS OF CHURCH POLITY



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PCS STRUCTURE AND GOVERNING BODIES

- The governing bodies of the Presbyterian Church in Singapore are:
- Sessions,
- Presbyteries,
- Synod

SESSION

- The session governs a particular congregation. It is made up of elders elected by the congregation, plus all the installed ministers on the staff, including associate ministers.
- The session is responsible for all decisions regarding the program and policies of its congregation, except for the authority reserved for the congregation: the election of officers, and the pastoral staff. The constitution spells out the specific duties for the session.

SESSION

- The session is composed of elders elected for specific terms of service as well as the installed minister(s) and associate minister(s). It is presided over by the senior pastor, who is the minister or an interim minister of the Presbytery when the minister is not available.
- The session elects its own Session clerk. The clerk of the session must be an elder. The Session clerk has many duties regarding the records of the church, and also serves as secretary of meetings of the congregation.

PRESBYTERY

- The presbytery is the governing body that has jurisdiction over the sessions of all the Presbyterian Church in Singapore congregations according to the language bounds and all its minister members. It is composed of "all the churches and ministers of the Word and Sacrament within".
- When the presbytery meets, its members include:
 - all ministers of the Word and Sacrament who are members of the presbytery,
 - all elders commissioned by their sessions to attend that meeting
 - any elder, elected ministers of the presbytery for the duration of his or her term.

PRESBYTERY

- The presbytery has the power to organize new congregations, to merge or to divide congregations, to dismiss a congregation or dissolve a congregation, all this being done in consultation with the members of the congregation involved.
- When a church is without a pastor, the presbytery takes special oversight of that church, appointing an interim moderator for the session, providing for the pulpit to be supplied, and doing other things necessary in the absence of an installed minister.

PRESBYTERY

- The presbytery has the power to "ordain, receive, dismiss, install, remove, and discipline ministers." It is the prerogative of the presbytery both to establish the relationship between a congregation and a minister and to dissolve a relationship when necessary. Establishing a relationship ordinarily means approving the call of the congregation to that particular minister to be its pastor and installing the pastor in that church. Before the presbytery approves the call to a particular minister, it hears the recommendations of the committee on ministry about its study and conclusions regarding the call.

SYNOD

- The Synod is the highest governing body in the Presbyterian Church in Singapore. It is made up of equal numbers of ministers and elders elected by the presbyteries, and it also has a number of Ministries - such as Youth Council, Theological Review and response Committee, Education Council, and Missions Committee etc - who have voice but not vote on the floor of the AGM. This body meets every year.
- The Synod "constitutes the bond of union, community, and mission among all its congregations and governing bodies."

SYNOD

- The Synod sets parameters for the mission of the entire denomination, determining priorities, developing objectives and strategies, and providing resources to carry out the work of the whole church. The Constitution lists the specific responsibilities of the Synod, including programs and ministries of evangelization, service, and witness. These programs should foster diversity and balance within the mission of the whole church. The Synod also has the right and duty to establish the administrative systems needed to carry out this mission.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What, in your opinion, are the strengths and weaknesses of the various forms of church polity today?
- What do you think are the strengths and weaknesses of Presbyterian polity?
- How can ORPC reinforce our denominational or historical distinctives?