

“What Makes Us Presbyterian?” (Part 1 of 2)

1 Corinthians 12:4-12; 1 Peter 5:1-4; Acts 6:1-7

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A few years ago, a young man showed up in the church office. He was trying to sell us a new copy machine, which we weren't interested in, but he and I had a nice conversation. He attends what he called a “Christian” church, and he was curious about our word “Presbyterian.” He asked me: “So, are you guys Christian? I mean, do you believe in Jesus?” It was a sincere question, which illustrates the sorry state of religious literacy in today's world. I explained that yes, we most certainly do!

The reality is, there are a lot of people who don't know what the word “Presbyterian” means, or even how to spell it. I cover some Presbyterian basics every time we do a new member class, and I've also learned that it's helpful to offer reminders from time to time to everyone else about who we are.

What makes us Presbyterian? *It's not the way we worship.* Not every Presbyterian church has an organ and a piano and a choir. Some use guitars and praise bands. There's not one “right” style of music. Nor is the order of worship always the same. There's a traditional order, but churches don't have to follow it, and we made a deliberate decision a few years back to deviate from the norm, putting the sermon at the end of the service rather than in the middle. Honestly, there are very few things that fall into the category of “must”s for Presbyterian worship. You need scripture, and you need prayer, but beyond that, there's a whole lot of freedom. It's not the way we *worship* that makes us Presbyterian.

Two things make us Presbyterian. One is our *theology*, our particular set of understandings about God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and so forth. The other is our *structure*, the way we organize ourselves. I initially thought I could cover both topics in one sermon – *wrong!* Really I ought to cover theology first, but today's scriptures have to do with structure, so we'll talk theology next week.

That word “Presbyterian” comes from a Greek word in the New Testament: *presbuteros*, which means “elder.” To say that this is a Presbyterian church is to say that this is a church run by elders. That's different from churches that have an episcopal structure, which are governed by *bishops* (the New Testament word *episkopos* means “bishop”), and it's different from *congregational* churches, which are governed by the *people* (*congregation* comes from a Latin word meaning “assembly”). For the most part, those are the three primary ways churches are structured: government by bishops; government by elders; government by the people. The first category is top-down; the last category is bottom-up; the middle category – which is where we are – is a mixture of both. (I'm painting in pretty

broad strokes here; there may be nuances in certain traditions that I'm glossing over.) Who makes the big decisions? Is it bishops, who have been appointed? Is it elders, who have been elected? Or is it the congregation as a whole? In our tradition, the congregation elects elders, and entrusts decision-making responsibility to them. In a church with a *congregational* structure, a lot more decisions are made at meetings of the congregation than what we have here. In a church with an *episcopal* structure, there are really *no* significant decisions made by the congregation. In our tradition, the congregation has *one* major decision to make each year, namely, to decide who its *leaders* will be. Which members of the church are we willing to *entrust* with both *power* and *responsibility*? It's a huge decision; *those are the people who make the big decisions*. They're called the *elders* of the church.

That group of elected elders is called "the Session." The word "Session" means "sitting." These are the people who *sit* and make decisions! Every Presbyterian church has a Session. When a new church is formed, it doesn't matter if they have a building, and it doesn't matter if they have a pastor, but they *have* to have a Session. That's typically the first critical decision a new church makes. There's biblical precedent here; when Paul and the other apostles went from town to town establishing churches, once they had a group of people who believed in Jesus and were ready to form a community, they had to decide: who would the elders be? Who would be entrusted with power and responsibility?

The critical question is, who has the *gifts* and the *leadership skills* and the *wisdom* and the *spiritual maturity* to be *good elders*? Leading a church wasn't easy then, and it's not easy now; the gifts that are needed are not gifts that just *anybody* has. One of the basic principles in the New Testament is that God endows people with different kinds of gifts. Some people have gifts for music; some people have gifts for teaching; some people have gifts for caring; some people have gifts for evangelism; some people have gifts for leadership. The church functions best when people are working in their areas of giftedness. You wouldn't want me trying to play that oboe, 'cause that's not my gift! Every church needs a means of determining, *who is really gifted at what?* You want the choir to be filled with people who are *good at singing*, right? We want the pies to be made by people who are *good at cooking*, right? In the same way, we want the Session to be comprised of people whom God has endowed with leadership skills and wisdom and spiritual maturity. We entrust to *them* the power and the responsibility for making the tough decisions. We *elect* and *ordain* them. Every now and then, I hear people saying things like, "So-and-so hasn't had a turn to be an elder; we should elect them." That's diametrically opposed to the whole New Testament concept. Imagine what the choir would be like if we all took turns in the choir loft! It's not about taking turns. It's about discerning *who has the right gifts*. In our system, that's the role of the Nominating Committee, arguably the most important committee in the whole church. The most successful organizations are the ones that put the *right people* in the *right seats*. The church is no different. You want a strong church? You elect strong elders.

So what does the Session do? Well, basically, they make sure the work of the church is properly carried out. When a church gets large enough, they delegate some of their responsibilities to committees, and oversee the work of those committees. They vote on matters of policy; they deal with matters of controversy that arise between different groups; they constantly try to discern God's will for the church. Newly-elected elders are often surprised to discover that not everyone thinks the same way they do about every little issue in the life of the church. That can be a real opportunity for growth. A

few years ago we had what I call “the grand communion cup debate.” Some people felt strongly that we should continue to use glass cups for communion, while others felt it was time we moved to plastic. There was a strong difference of opinion among the elders on Session. It took some time and some effort, but we eventually worked out a compromise that everyone could live with. More recently, the Session spent some time discussing how much we should charge groups for use of the church building, because after our renovation was complete, the requests for use of the building increased, and our utility bills also increased. Soon, the Session will be deciding what to do with that cross. That screen is about to come down, and pipes are going up there – a donation from North Westminster Presbyterian Church in Lansing – and the cross simply can’t stay where it is. The question is, *where will it go?* Session will be wrestling with that question soon. Sometimes it happens that Session makes a decision that is not liked by everybody; every now and then we get a letter from somebody in the congregation who is upset about something; that is perfectly fine and appropriate. Everybody always has an opportunity to be heard. But everybody also needs to be aware that you’re not always going to get your way. This is one of the challenges in a Presbyterian church – you have to be willing to *trust* the people you elect to office. In the large Presbyterian church I belonged to in New Jersey, I didn’t always *agree* with every decision that the Session made. But over time I came to realize that I *trust* the people who are making those decisions, and so I learned to *respect* their decisions, even if I disagreed with some of them. *They* were the ones who had been entrusted with decision-making responsibility. I had to learn my place!

We also have *Deacons* in the Presbyterian Church. The Greek word in the New Testament is *diakonos*, “someone who serves.” The origin of the deacons is told in Acts 6; basically, there were people in the church whose needs were being neglected. The church leaders got together and said, “This isn’t right.” But they also knew it wasn’t right to pull the teachers and evangelists away from their jobs – *somebody* needs to teach and preach the Word of God; that job is also too important to be neglected – so they decided, “we need a group of people who have particular gifts for *service* and *caring*.” So they chose seven people with those gifts, and the apostles prayed and laid their hands on them. *Voila*, now there were Deacons. In the Presbyterian church today, there are two different ways the Deacons can be organized: they can be individually commissioned, or they can be established as a Board. We have a Board; every Presbyterian church I know has a Board; I don’t know of any church that does it the other way. Having a board means, in our case, they maintain their own funds, they get together to make decisions, they coordinate with one another to try to insure that everyone is receiving sufficient care. If you know of somebody in the congregation who in need of special care, let the Deacons know; that’s what they’re there for. And just like with the Session, it’s important to elect the right people to the office of Deacon, the people who *truly* have those gifts of service and caring.

Underlying all of this is that basic, fundamental New Testament principle: *God gives different people different gifts*. The challenge is figuring out what gifts *you* have. A number of years ago, several dozen members took an assessment to determine their gifts. That was a helpful and enlightening exercise, and we need to find a way to incorporate that into the ongoing life of the church. Not just to find good candidates for the offices of elder and deacon, but to help *everyone* figure out how they can both help the church *and* experience the joy that comes from offering the gift that God gave *you*.

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