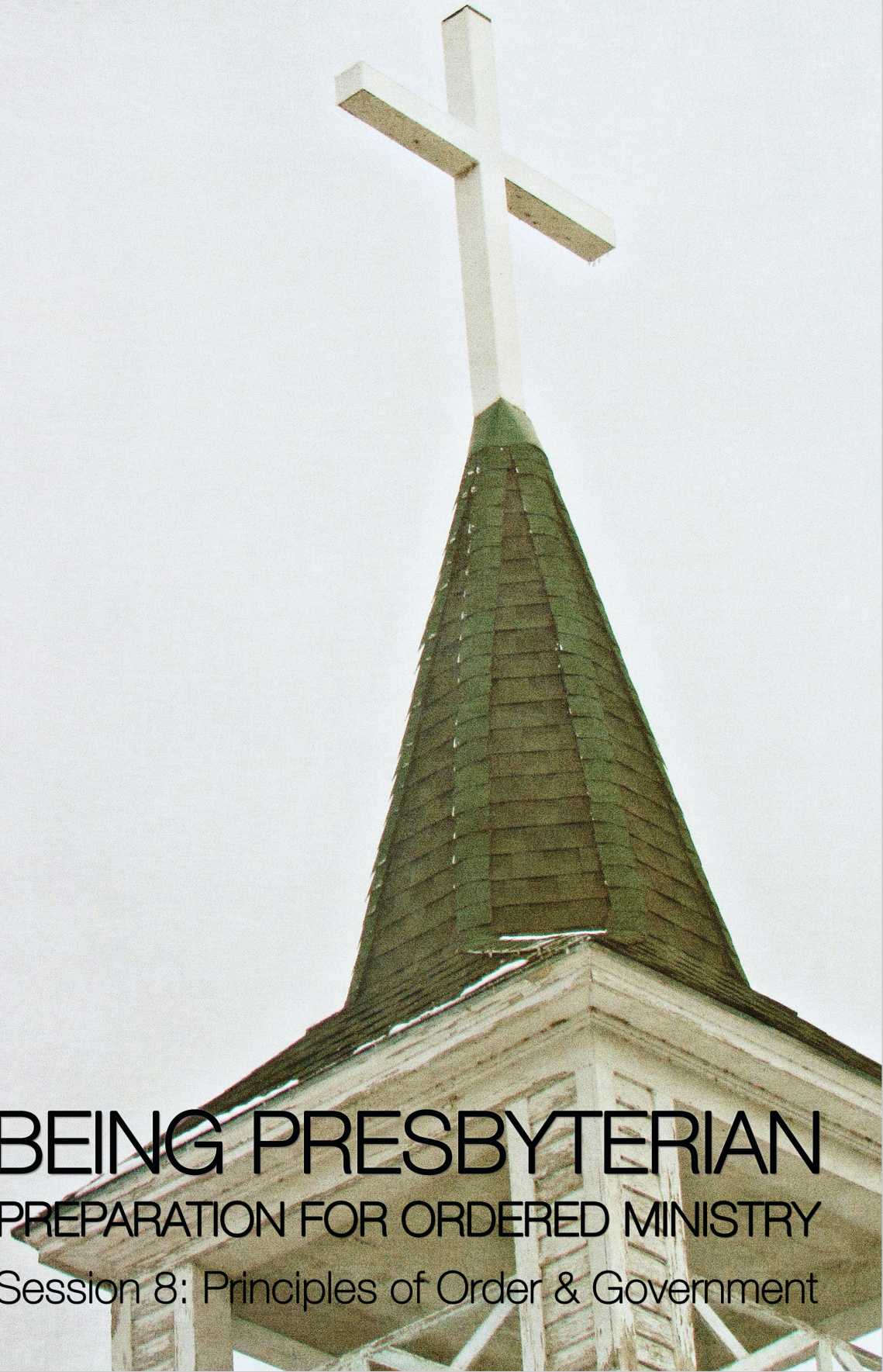


Theoacademy

BEING PRESBYTERIAN
PREPARATION FOR ORDERED MINISTRY
Session 8: Principles of Order & Government



Theocademy

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Getting started

Before watching the video, consider the following questions.

- How would you respond if a friend asked you, “What’s so special about the way Presbyterians govern themselves?”
- Think about the ways you’ve made decisions as a part of a group in the past. Which strategies have been effective? Which have crashed and burned?

During the video

Jot down any insights you gain from Dr. Kirkpatrick’s descriptions of the Principles of Church Order and Government.

Historic Principles of Church Order (F-3.01)	
God is Lord of the Conscience	
Corporate Judgment	
Officers	
Truth and Goodness	
Mutual Forbearance	
Election by the People	
Church Power	

The Value of Ecclesiastical Discipline	
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Principles of Presbyterian Government (F-3.02)	
One Church	
Governed by Presbyters	
Gathered in Councils	
Seek and Represent the Will of Christ	
Decision by Majority Vote	
Review and Control	
Ordination by Council	
Shared Power, Exercised Jointly	
General Authority of Councils	

Discerning together

Over the course of this session and the next, we'll be looking at strategies for handling one of your biggest (and often most difficult) responsibilities as an ordered minister: decision-making. Landon's joke in the last video – "Put four Presbyterians in a room, and you're going to have five opinions" – isn't merely true for confessional understanding. It also holds for how we understand God is calling us to act on and act out our faith. And this isn't a new issue we're facing, either; as long as the church has been in existence, we've been trying to figure out how to deal with differences in opinion (just see Acts 15 if you had any doubt). In response to the 217th General Assembly's (2006) call to resource church leaders for the decision-making process, Rev.

Victoria Curtiss created a handbook called “Guidelines for Communal Discernment.”¹ In the 24-page document, she outlines a step-by-step process by which groups can pursue consensus as they seek to discern the leading of the Holy Spirit in the decisions they face. She breaks it down into three main steps:

1. **The Community Gathers in Christ** (*Praying*): build community, affirm a covenant, and clarify the issue.
2. **The Community Listens to the Holy Spirit** (*Listening*): let go, reflect on Scripture, share information, name options, and weigh options.
3. **The Community Goes Forth as God’s People** (*Choosing*): choose direction, rest with the direction, and make a formal decision.

Let’s give this concept a dry-run as we learn about it. Choose an issue your church is currently considering (preferably not a monumental one – remember, we’re still getting acquainted with this strategy) and talk through it using the following guidelines.²

The community gathers in Christ

Build Community. As Curtiss affirms, “The stronger the relationships among persons, the more likely they will be able to discern faithfully God’s will.” If we were given the choice of going either to a family dinner or to a committee meeting, most of us would probably choose the former – because it’s a place where we know and are known, where we love and are loved, and where our voices and perspectives are valued.

- Why is it important for us as ordered ministers to get to know one another on a personal level?

- How might you as a group build community (or even family) among your members?

Affirm a Covenant. Groups, regardless of size or background, always benefit from clarity in purpose and principles. Once you’ve gotten to know each other, you have the opportunity (and responsibility) of making a commitment to one another about how you will interact – and how you’ll go about coming to decisions. Curtiss advocates writing out a covenant. As you begin to think through how you’d structure your covenant as a group, consider the following areas (as well as others you can think of):

- What is God calling us to *be*, *know*, and *do* as this particular group?

¹ Available online at <http://pc-biz.org> – if you click on the “Resources” tab, you can find a PDF of the guide under both the 220th General Assembly (2012) and the 218th General Assembly (2008). You can also purchase print copies at <http://store.pcusa.org/2435808007>.

² I’m using Curtiss’ section headings and main ideas as I walk you through this process, but I’ve adapted the questions to reflect some of the major themes we’ve talked about through this series.

- How does Scripture guide us in our interactions with one another?
- How may we maintain a climate of worship as we go through our decision-making process?
- How will we handle disagreements and other uncomfortable situations when they arise?

Clarify the Issue. Make sure that everyone knows exactly the topic or issue that is being discussed. Also make sure that all the parameters for discussion and operation are set ahead of time. The surer you are of what you're supposed to be doing when you're going in, the easier the whole process will be.

- What is the key issue being considered here?
- What parameters or principles should guide this discernment process?

The community listens to the Holy Spirit

Let Go. At this point, individual group members are encouraged to prayerfully identify and lay aside any attitudes or actions (either past or present) that might block the Holy Spirit's work in and through them.³ The goal here is to reach what Curtiss calls *Holy Indifference* – a willingness to let go of anything in ourselves or our lives that stands in the way of God's plan.

- What in your life might be getting in the way of you experiencing God's full blessing and the Holy Spirit's full leading?
- What plans and expectations of your own do you need to give Christ control of?

³ Traditionally, this might be referred to as "confession and repentance," although Curtiss doesn't explicitly give it those names here.

Reflect on Scripture. We can gain insight on God’s leading in our own lives when we examine the nature of God’s leading in the lives of those who have come before us – especially those recorded in the Bible.

- Which specific passages might speak to the issue at hand here?

- What general themes across Scripture might lend insight into our discernment process?

Share Information. At this point, we need to make sure that everyone involved in the discernment process knows all the necessary facts in order to make a well-informed decision. (Curtiss advocates that a subgroup, whose members reflect a variety of perspectives on the issue, gather and prepare this information before the larger group meets. They can then share it both orally and in writing with the group.)

- What details are absolutely necessary for your group members to understand before discerning God’s will in this situation?

- Do group members need this information before the meeting time, or is it sufficient to inform them once they’ve gathered?

Name Options. Once the group has been informed about the “nuts and bolts” of the situation, it’s time for you to come up with potential responses to it. This can be done in a couple of different ways: you can either brainstorm a variety of options, or if the group is already starting to sense God’s movement in a specific direction, you can begin to articulate what the appropriate response might be.

- In what way(s) might you as a group address the situation at hand?

- Do you notice any ideas or themes running across the responses? How might this be an indication of God’s leading in this situation?

Weigh the Options. Take time to prayerfully and thoughtfully consider all the proposed options in response to the leading of the Holy Spirit. There are number of different formats by which this process might be undertaken; you're free to choose or combine any that you think will be effective in this situation.

- *Open Conversation.* Simply discuss the topic as a group; there's little formal structure to this method.
- *Good upon Good.* In this format, no weaknesses are pointed out; instead, you as a group seek to discern which of the options poses the greatest *good* to the situation.
- *Advantages and Disadvantages.* Each group member prayerfully considers the benefits and drawbacks of both doing and not doing each option presented. Then those responses are shared as a group with no questions (other than clarification). Once all the responses have been shared, each group member makes a "provisional decision" and backs it up with one or two key reasons for choosing this option.
- ***Negatives First, Then Positives.*** Each group member prayerfully considers and shares the negative aspects of each option first, with only questions of clarification being asked. This process then frees up the group to fully share and consider the positive aspects of each option (again, with only clarification questions asked). Then, as a group, you can consider the appropriate course of action to take.
- Choose one of the options above and work through the process.
- How well did the strategy work? Did it flow smoothly, or was it clunky? Would you try that option again?

The community goes forth as God's people

Choose Direction. It's time to reach consensus. Now, consensus doesn't necessarily mean unanimity – rather, as Curtiss explains, it's "a shared sense of God's presence as manifest through the group's work together and through the decision reached. Members of the group affirm that they have been heard and are willing to move ahead in a common direction that most, if not all, have sensed to be the leading of the Holy Spirit."

- As you sense the direction God is leading your group, put your proposed course of action into a declarative statement:
"In this situation, we believe God is calling us to..."

- Are the members of your group in general agreement about this statement? If not, how might it be revised or “wordsmithed” to better reflect the way God is leading you?

Rest with the Decision. Allow time to pass before you make your decision public. As you think and pray about it, consider the following questions:

- What consolation (“a sense of peace and movement toward God”) does this decision bring you?
- What desolation (“a sense of distress and movement away from God”) does this decision bring you?

Make a Formal Decision. After you have discerned God’s leading in the situation and have “slept on it,” it’s time to make a final, binding decision on the issue.⁴ This can either be achieved by the use of parliamentary procedure (which we’ll be talking about in the next session) or through a formal statement.

- What is your decision?
- What is the best format in which to make this decision public? (i.e., formal letter, entered into the meeting’s minutes, announcement during worship service, etc.)

Personal reflection

After the session, complete the following statements.

- In this model of communal discernment, I most resonated with:

⁴ If God’s leading can’t clearly be discerned during the given timeframe, Curtiss advocates a number of possible alternatives: repeat the discernment process; take time for further prayer and reflection; identify sub-areas in which agreement *has* been reached, as well as those to be resolved at a later time; identify steps for further exploration; appoint a smaller group or individual to make the decision; vote by majority/supermajority rule; or drop the matter.

