

PT5325 Church Polity

February 20–21, 2026

RTS Atlanta

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Course Description

An examination of the biblical data relative to church government, the historical development of Presbyterian polity, and the Book of Church Order (of the PCA and other American Presbyterian denominations). The organization and function of church courts, including discipline and appeals, are considered, and parliamentary procedure is emphasized.

Class Hours

Friday, February 20: 8 am to 5 pm (one-hour lunch break)

Saturday, February 21: 8 am to 3 pm (one-hour lunch break)

Course Readings

1. *The Acts of the Apostles*: Before class, read through the book of Acts. Be attentive especially to the ways in which Luke describes how the *order* of the church serves the *mission* of the church.
2. Calvin, John. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Selections from book four will be posted on Canvas.
3. Presbyterian Church in America. *The Book of Church Order of the Presbyterian Church in America*. Atlanta: Office of the Stated Clerk of the PCA, 2025.
 - Available electronically in English and Korean at www.pcaac.org
 - Students from other denominations are permitted (and encouraged) to substitute the BCO (or equivalent) of their particular denomination.
4. Smyth, Thomas. *An Ecclesiastical Catechism of the Presbyterian Church*. 7th ed. Fellsmere, FL: Reformation Christian Ministries, 2007.
5. Waters, Guy. *How Jesus Runs the Church*. Philipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2011.
6. Witherow, Thomas. *The Apostolic Church, Which Is It?* (many editions available).

Class Outline (more or less)

1. Introduction to the Class: Why Study Polity?
 - a. What is Church Power?
 - b. What is Church Office?
2. The Apostolic Church: Polity in New Testament Teaching and Practice
3. Presbyterian Polity
 - a. Historical Development
 - b. Distinguishing Characteristics of American Presbyterianism
4. Surveying Features of the PCA BCO (and other Books of Church Order)
 - a. Form of Government
 - b. Book of Discipline
 - c. [Directory for Worship]
5. Special Issues in Church Polity (time permitting)
 - a. Parliamentary Procedure & Robert's Rules of Order
 - b. Training of Church Officers

Course Requirements

- Attend all lectures.
- Read all assigned texts. You must submit a reading report by April 11, 2026.
- Sustain final examination: Complete a short-answer exam on 20-25 key terms and expression in Presbyterian Polity. This is a closed book examination on Canvas. Two-hour time limit. DUE DATE: February 28, 2026.
- *Brief* assessment (aim for 800–1000 words) of your church's Book of Church Order with a particular view toward the virtues you identify in its structure and the weaknesses that you believe warrant possible amending. (If your church lacks a BCO, examine whatever documents may function in that way, such as congregational by-laws). DUE DATE: March 23, 2026.

Zoom Policy

Your professor may allow you to Zoom into class or watch Zoom recordings for excused absences based on the professor's discretion and subject to the availability of equipment. Students should contact their professor well in advance of the class meeting. For a third absence the Registrar should be consulted. Your professor may require additional interactive assignments to offset the absence of classroom interaction. Sync or Remote Live courses have priority for the limited Zoom equipment.

Extension Policy

All assignments and exams are to be completed by the deadlines announced in this syllabus or in class.

Extensions for assignments and exams due within the normal duration of the course must be approved beforehand by the Professor. Extensions of two weeks or less beyond the date of the last deadline for the course must be approved beforehand by the Professor. A grade penalty may be assessed.

Extensions of greater than two weeks, but not more than six weeks, beyond the last deadline for the course may be granted in extenuating circumstances (i.e. illness, family emergency). For an extension of more than two weeks the student must request an Extension Request Form from the Registrar's Office. The request must be approved by the Professor and the Academic Dean. A grade penalty may be assessed (RTS Catalog p. 46 and RTS Atlanta Student Handbook p. 18).

Any incompletes not cleared six weeks after the last published due date for course work will be converted to a failing grade. Professors may have the failing grade changed to a passing grade by request (RTS Catalog p. 49).

Some Questions on Presbyterian Polity to be Discussed in Class

(a few of which may find themselves on the final exam)

1. What is “post-denominationalism?”
2. How is church power ministerial and declarative?
3. What is the relation of Christian liberty to religious worship?
4. What is the difference between the *esse* of the church and the *bene esse* of the church?
5. In what sense is the church a voluntary association? In what sense is it not?
6. What is the difference between the power of order and the power of jurisdiction?
7. What is an “*in thesi* declaration”?
8. What is the difference between divestment and deposition from office?
9. What does “laboring outside of presbytery bounds” entail?
10. What are some of the grounds for erasing members from the roll of membership?
11. What is the difference between administrative and judicial discipline?
12. What is a “regional church,” and does it have scriptural rationale?
13. What is meant by “general office” and “special office?”
14. What are the ordinary and perpetual offices in the church? Where is scriptural proof?
15. How many special offices are there in the church?
16. What is the biblical basis for the office of deacon? Is it an office of rule or of service?
17. What is the difference between the mediatorial rule of Christ and the providential rule of Christ?
18. What is “divine right Presbyterianism?”
19. What is unique about continental Reformed polity?
20. What is unique about PCA polity?
21. What are some of the different approaches to confessional subscription in American Presbyterian history?
22. What does it mean to “receive and adopt” the confession of faith and catechisms?
23. What does “approve of the form of government, discipline and worship” mean?
24. What is the constitution of the church and how can it be amended?

Every Presbyterian’s Life Verse: “But all things should be done decently and in good order” (1 Cor 14:40)

Presbyterian Polity: A Basic Bibliography

- Bannerman, James. *The Church of Christ: A Treatise on the Nature, Powers, Ordinances, Discipline and Government of the Christian Church*. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1960. [First published in 1869.]
- Brown, Mark R., ed. *Order in the Offices: Essays Defining the Roles of Church Officers*. 2nd ed. Libertyville, IL: Reformed Forum, 2024.
- Calvin, John. *Institutes of Christian Religion*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960.
- Cannada, Robert C., and W. Jack Williamson. *The Historic Polity of the PCA*. Jackson, Miss: First Presbyterian Church, 1997.
- Cowan, Steven B., ed. *Who Runs the Church? Four Views on Church Government*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004.
- Hall, David W., ed. *The Practice of Confessional Subscription*. Lanham: University Press of America, 1995.
- Hall, David W. and Joseph H. Hall, eds. *Paradigms in Polity*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994.
- Hodge, Charles. *Discussions in Church Polity: From the Contributions of the "Princeton Review."* New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1878.
- Hodge, J. Aspinwall. *What Is Presbyterian Law? As Defined by the Church Courts*. Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1882.
- Lucas, Sean Michael. *On Being Presbyterian: Our Beliefs, Practices, and Stories*. Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 2006.
- _____. *What Is Church Government?* Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 2009.
- Miller, Samuel. *The Ruling Elder*. Dallas: Presbyterian Heritage Publications, 1984.
- Robinson, Stuart. *The Church of God as an Essential Element of the Gospel*. Willow Grove, PA: Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 2009. [First published in 1858.]
- Smith, Morton H. *Commentary on the PCA Book of Church Order*. 6th ed. Taylors, SC: Presbyterian Press, 2007.
- Waters, Guy Prentiss. *How Jesus Runs the Church*. Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 2011.
- _____. *Well Ordered, Living Well: A Field Guide to Presbyterian Church Government*. Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2022.
- Witherow, Thomas. *The Apostolic Church, Which Is It? An Enquiry at the Oracles of God As to Whether Any Existing Form of Church Government Is of Divine Right*. Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1990. [First published in 1856; many editions available.]

Course Objectives Related to MDiv* Student Learning Outcomes

Course: PT5325 Church Polity

Professor: Muether

Campus: Atlanta

Date: February 2026

<u>MDiv* Student Learning Outcomes</u>		<u>Rubric</u>	<u>Mini-Justification</u>
<p><i>In order to measure the success of the MDiv curriculum, RTS has defined the following as the intended outcomes of the student learning process. Each course contributes to these overall outcomes. This rubric shows the contribution of this course to the MDiv outcomes.</i></p> <p><i>*As the MDiv is the core degree at RTS, the MDiv rubric will be used in this syllabus.</i></p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Strong ➤ Moderate ➤ Minimal ➤ None 	
Articulation (oral & written)	Broadly understands and articulates knowledge, both oral and written, of essential biblical, theological, historical, and cultural/global information, including details, concepts, and frameworks. Also includes ability to preach and teach the meaning of Scripture to both heart and mind with clarity and enthusiasm.	Moderate	Interacts with topics of polity by writing a paper based on Scriptural and theological principles.
Scripture	Significant knowledge of the original meaning of Scripture. Also, the concepts for and skill to research further into the original meaning of Scripture and to apply Scripture to a variety of modern circumstances. (Includes appropriate use of original languages and hermeneutics; and integrates theological, historical, and cultural/global perspectives.)	Minimal	Must engage in the Scriptural arguments for particular forms of polity.
Reformed Theology	Significant knowledge of Reformed theology and practice, with emphasis on the Westminster Standards.	Strong	The case is made that Reformed theology yields Reformed polity.
Sanctification	Demonstrates a love for the Triune God that aids the student's sanctification.	Moderate	Discusses the importance of church discipline in the life of Christian discipleship.
Desire for Worldview	Burning desire to conform all of life to the Word of God.	None	
Winsomely Reformed	Embraces a winsomely Reformed ethos. (Includes an appropriate ecumenical spirit with other Christians, especially Evangelicals; a concern to present the Gospel in a God-honoring manner to non-Christians; and a truth-in-love attitude in disagreements.)	Moderate	Charitable assessment of non-Presbyterian polities.
Pastoral Ministry	Ability to minister the Word of God to hearts and lives of both church and unchurched, to include preaching, teaching, leading in worship, leading, and shepherding the local congregation, aiding in spiritual maturity, concern for non-Christians.	Strong	Pastoral oversight of church members and the need for shepherding is stressed.