

Reformed Theological Seminary
Church Polity PT5325
2025 Syllabus

Chad Van Dixhoorn

Course information

Class dates: August 19 – November 11 (12 weeks)

Class time: Wednesday 1–2PM

No class: October 7 (Fall break)

Dinner discussion: TBD

Credit hours: 1

Contact: Dr. Van Dixhoorn cvandixhoorn@rts.edu
PA: Faith Key fkey@rts.edu
TA: Kirby Key KKey3761@student.rts.edu
and Will Dodd willdoddsr71@gmail.com

Office hours: This term I plan to be in my office frequently from Tuesday to Thursday. Contact me for either (1) personal matters, or (2) historical and theological questions. Please try valiantly to meet me during those three days, but email Faith Key for all in-person appointments or appointments at other times in the week. If you have a question about the class, please contact Kirby Key *after* reading the syllabus carefully.

Description (as per RTS *Catalogue*)

“Students examine the biblical data relative to church government and The Book of Church Order. The organization and function of church courts, including discipline and appeals, are considered, and parliamentary procedure is emphasized.”

Course Objectives

- (1) To understand and to articulate the history of church polities and the biblical foundations of presbyterian church government
- (2) To grasp the principles informing the form of government and discipline in the *Book of Church Order* (BCO) of the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) or the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC)
- (3) To learn the details of the BCO
- (4) To acquire practical acquaintance with parliamentary procedure.

Class dinner

My wife Emily plans to host you all for evening dinner and dessert this term. This shared meal and discussion will count as the thirteenth week of class time. We will discuss assigned reading, especially Samuel Miller's piece.

Required Reading

The Book of Church Order of the Presbyterian Church in America (6th ed.; Lawrenceville, Ga.: Office of the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America, 2022). <https://www.pcaac.org/bco/> **OR**

The Book of Church Order of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (Willow Grove, PA: Committee on Christian Education of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 2020). <https://opc.org/order.html>

Edmund Clowney, 'A brief for church governors', in Mark Brown, ed., *Order in the offices: Essays Defining the Roles of Church Offices*, 2nd ed., 43–65 (Provided on Canvas).

T. David Gordon, [*Arguments and Argumentative Fallacies: A Primer for Church Officers*](#)

John Knox, 'The book of discipline, 1560', in Hall and Hall, eds., *Paradigms in polity*, pp. 219–225 (Provided on Canvas).

Samuel Miller, [*Letters on Clerical Manners and Habits*](#), (New York: G&C Carvill, 1927), Letter XI.

John Murray, *Writings*, vol. 2, chapters 29–30 (Provided on Canvas).

Henry M. Robert III et al., *Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised In Brief* (2d ed.; Cambridge, Mass.: Da Capo Press, 2011). (Provided on Canvas).

Alan Strange, [*"How to Run the Session Meeting"*](#)

Guy Prentiss Waters, *How Jesus Runs the Church* (P&R 2011).

Westminster assembly, 'Directory for Church government', in Hall and Hall, eds., *Paradigms in polity*, pp. 260–277 (Provided on Canvas).

Lecture, Quiz and Reading Schedule

Week	Quiz	PCA BCO	OPC BCO	Reading
Wk 1	N	Church Polities	Church Polities	Knox <i>Directory</i>
Wk 2	Y	Pref., Chs 1– 3	Pref., FOG 1-4, 29-31	WA <i>Directory</i>
Wk 3	Y	Chs 4 – 9	FOG 5-11, 17	Waters, Intro
Wk 4	Y	Chs 10 – 15	FOG 18-19, 12-15	Waters, ch. 1

Wk 5	Y	Chs 16 – 21	FOG 20-23	Waters, ch. 2
Wk 6	Y	Chs 22 – 26	FOG 23-28, 16, 32	Murray; Clowney
Wk 7	Y	Chs 27 – 30	BOD I-III	Waters, ch. 3
Wk 8	Y	Chs 31 – 38	BOD IV-VI	Waters, ch. 4
Wk 9	Y	Chs 39 – 46	BOD VII-IX	Waters, ch. 5
Wk 10	Y	Chs 47 – 55	DPW Preface, I-II	Waters, ch. 6
Wk 11	Y	Chs 56 – 58	DPW III-IV	Waters, ch. 7 skim
Wk 12	Y	Chs 59 – 63	DPW V	Miller; Strange; Gordon

Recommended Texts

History of PCA polity

<https://www.pcahistory.org/bco/index.html>

Reformation & Post- Reformation Church Polity

1. Assertion of the Government of the Church of Scotland – George Gillespie
[1641 edition](#)
[Transcribed edition](#)
2. Institutes of the Christian Religion – John Calvin (Book 4, chapters 1-12, 670-826)
3. [Ecclesiastical Ordinances](#) – 1561 Geneva (15 pages)
4. [The Second Book of Discipline](#) – The Church of Scotland (All)
5. [The Church Order of Dordt](#)
6. Ecclesiastical Discipline (1559, French Reformed) (in *Paradigms in Polity*)
7. Directory for Church Government – The Westminster Assembly
[1647 edition](#)
[Transcribed edition](#)
8. [The Westminster Confession of Faith](#) and [Larger Catechism](#) (Ch. 25, 26, 30, 31, Q. 61-65)
9. [The Belgic Confession of Faith](#) (Articles 27-32)
10. [The Second Helvetic Confession](#) (Ch 17-18)
11. [The Gallican Confession](#) (Articles 25-33)

Other

Robert J. Breckinridge, Presbyterian Government: Not a Hierarchy, but a Commonwealth

William Cunningham, “Church Power” and “The Rights of the Christian People”; Discussions on Church Principles

Mark Dever, Chad Van Dixhoorn, and Hunter Powell, “[Polity is for Everybody](#),” 9Marks Panel Discussion

John Girardeau, The Importance of the Office of Deacon

Charles Hodge, The Constitutional History of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America

George Knight, “[Two Offices and Two Orders of Elders: A New Testament Study](#)”

Samuel Miller, *The Ruling Elder*

Thomas E. Peck, *Notes on Ecclesiology* (2d ed.; 1892; repr. Greenville, S.C.: Southern Presbyterian Press, 2005).

Henry M. Robert, *Robert’s Rules of Order Newly Revised* (11th ed.; Cambridge, Mass.: Da Capo Press, 2011).

Stuart Robinson, *The Church of God As An Essential Element of the Gospel* (1858; repr. Willow Grove, Penn.: The Committee on Christian Education of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 2009).

Samuel Rutherford, *The Due Right of Presbyteries*

Thomas Smyth, *An Ecclesiastical Catechism of the Presbyterian Church*

Wayne Spear, *Covenant Uniformity in Religion: The Influence of the Scottish Commissioners on the Ecclesiology of the Westminster Assembly*

Alan Strange, ["Do Ministers and the Elder Hold the Same Office?"](#) *Ordained Servant* vol 22

Alan Strange, [Commentary on the Form of Government of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church](#)

Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* Vol. 3, Eighteenth Topic (Chapters 16-34)

Cornelis Van Dam, *The Deacon: The Biblical Roots and the Ministry of Mercy Today*, Chs. 3-6, 9-13

C. B. Van Dixhoorn, "Presbyterian ecclesiologies at the Westminster Assembly," in *Church polity and politics in the British Atlantic world, c.1635-1666*, eds H. Powell and E. Vernon (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019), 104-129

C. B. Van Dixhoorn, "The Seventeenth Century and the Westminster Assembly," *The Oxford handbook of Presbyterianism*, eds. P. C. Kemeny and G. S. Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 29-49.

The Westminster Confession of Faith Together With the Larger Catechism and the Shorter Catechism with the Scripture Proofs (3d ed.; Atlanta: CE&P, 1990).

Thomas Witherow, *The Apostolic Church: Which is it?*

Johannes Wollebius, *The Outward Administration of the Church* (The Abridgement of Christian Divinity)

Assessment

(1) Weekly Quizzes on the BCO. See above for the portions of the *BCO* covered on each quiz, and for the schedule of the quizzes. Quizzes will be in short answer and fill-in-the-blank format, and will be administered through the TA. *Each quiz will be completed no later than 5 P.M. of the day of class, as listed above. Students will take quizzes on campus in class. Please direct technical questions to the TA.*

There are no make-up quizzes. You may drop one (1) quiz. 40% of Final Grade

(2) BCO Outline. Students will submit on Canvas an outline of the *BCO*. The outline must be the student's original work; students are not permitted to consult other outlines. The outline must cover the entirety of the *BCO*, but must be no longer than twenty-five (25) pages. This outline is **due the day of the last quiz. 15% of Final Grade**

(3) A 10-12 page paper. Your term paper must identify and defend from Scripture the essential elements or basic building blocks of a presbyterian church polity. You may use the assigned readings and any other resources that you think would be helpful. The paper should use no less than six sources, including the Bible. The paper is to be double-spaced and in Times New Roman, 12 pt font. The title page and bibliography do not count towards the page count. This paper is due **one week following the final day of class (November 18)**. Please arrange your schedule accordingly. **No Late Papers Will Be Accepted. 30% of Final Grade**

Students are encouraged to utilize academic journal articles for their research papers, which can be accessed at <https://rts.edu/academics/library/databases/>

(4) Reading. Students will sign a pledge indicating the percentage of the total reading completed for the course. This pledge **is due the day of the last quiz (November 11). 5% of the Final Grade**

(5) Memorization of Eph 4:1-16. You must recite these verses (in any translation) to a fellow student in the course. That student must indicate in Canvas to the course TA in writing that you have successfully completed the assignment (i.e. that you have recited Eph 4:1-16, from memory, without error). This statement should be as follows – “[Name (the one recited)] recited [Bible verse(s)] to me, [your name], on [date].” This assignment is **due the day of the last quiz (November 11). 5% of Final Grade**

(6) Attend a Meeting of a Church Court. Students will attend at least one (1) meeting of a church court in its entirety. The court may be a session (or elders) meeting, but should preferably be a presbytery meeting. Students will then meet with at least one (1) member of that court after the meeting, and discuss that meeting with that elder, using the suggested questions supplied below. The meeting should last around a half hour. Students will submit to the course TA a statement indicating the extent to which he has fulfilled these requirements. This statement should be as follows –

“I, [Name], attended [the session meeting of X church or the Presbytery meeting at X church] on [date]. After the meeting, I spoke with [RE/TE name].” This statement is **due the day of the last quiz (November 11). 5% of Final Grade**

Attendance

Class attendance is required for PT 5325. If a student anticipates an unavoidable absence, he should notify the instructor in advance. Each hour of unexcused absence subjects the student to reduction of his final grade by one-half of a letter grade. **Students missing more than three hours will fail the course.**

Grading Scale

The grading scale for this course is the seminary’s grading scale. You may find it listed at https://rts.edu/academics/policies-and-procedures-at-rts/#Grading_System

Plagiarism

Please review the seminary’s policy on plagiarism. Plagiarized work will subject the student to failure in the course and possible disciplinary action.

Grading policies

All written work must be submitted on Canvas.

Late work is not accepted. If you are unable to complete an assignment on time, **please submit incomplete work instead**. For additional help understanding the grading scale or my hand-written notes, please see the file, “Grading Policies,” in Canvas. This policy holds in all

situations except in the case of extraordinary extenuating circumstance. A medical emergency is an example of an extenuating circumstance; a busy academic or work schedule is not.

Each term I will routinely choose as many as three people with whom to discuss one or more pieces of their written work. Students should expect that in this conversation I will ask about the development of their written work and discuss with the student claims made or sources used. I also reserve the right, in the event that I have any concern about AI use, plagiarism, or cheating, to substitute an oral exam for any assignment, quiz, test or exam. The length and complexity of the oral exam will depend on the scope and complexity of the assignment or assessment exercise.

RTS Extension Policy

In extenuating circumstances, a deadline extension of **up to one week** may be granted at the discretion of the professor. Requests for extensions of **more than one week** must be submitted to the Registrar for consideration by the Academic Dean in consultation with the professor. Extensions are granted only for significant emergencies or unforeseen circumstances, and a grade penalty may be applied. *All extension requests must be made **prior to the assignment deadline**.* No retrospective extensions will be granted.

Follow-Up Meeting With a Member-Elder Regarding a Meeting of a Church Court

The following are sample questions to help you in your follow-up meeting. They are not exhaustive, and you are not restricted to them. They are ways to help prime the pump of your conversation.

1. How is the docket put together?
 - What order does it follow?
 - Why does it follow this order? Could it follow another order?
 - Who is involved in putting it together?
 - When is it sent out to the court? How is it sent out to the court?
2. How did you prepare for this meeting?
 - How would you advise me to prepare for session meetings? presbytery meetings? General Assembly?
 - Looking back, what would you have done at the beginning of your ministry to help you to have benefited more from your participation in the courts of the church?
3. Did this meeting reflect a standard business load for this court?
 - Why or why not?
 - What factors can make the load heavier? lighter?
4. Which are the committees of this court?
 - What are they tasked with doing? (discuss each one)
 - What is the rationale behind this committee structure? In your opinion, is it an effective structure? Could it be improved? If so, how?
 - Have you ever served on such a committee? Chaired such a committee? What were your experiences? What did you (not) enjoy? What surprised you most about the work you did on this committee? Would you like to do it again? Did you find it helpful to you in your ministry? If so, how? Did your experiences in ministry help you contribute to the work of that committee?
 - How would you describe the relationship between the court's committees and the court itself? Is there trust between the committees and the court? Why or why not? What are some ways that a court can help to foster trust between its committees and the court? What are some things that can break down trust between a court and its committees?
5. What, for you, was the highlight of this meeting of the court? Why?
6. What, for you, was the most challenging or difficult moment of this meeting of the court? Why?
7. Do you think that you and your fellow-elders left this meeting of the court encouraged? Why or why not? What are some ways that church courts can be places where elders leave encouraged? In your experience, what are some things about meetings of church courts that can discourage member elders? How can these matters be addressed constructively?
8. What advice would you give to me if I were to moderate a meeting of a church court?

RTS Charlotte Classroom Technology Usage

RTS Charlotte recognizes how essential it is for students to have reliable, campus-wide access to the internet. For that reason, we have made Wi-Fi available for our student body, not only in the library and student lounges, but also in the classrooms. We know that students need to use the internet to download class materials, access files on the Cloud, and locate other important information. However, we also recognize that internet access in the classroom provides opportunity for abuse and misuse. Some students have unfortunately used their internet access to engage in many activities that distract them from the classroom lectures (e.g., surfing the web, checking sports scores, playing games). Not only does such activity hamper a student's own seminary education, but it distracts other students who can easily view the screens of nearby students. In addition, donors and classroom guests (who often sit in the back) can see this inappropriate internet usage, which reflects poorly on RTS. Classroom etiquette includes leaving cell phones turned off, refraining from surfing the Internet or playing computer games or other distracting activities. In addition, students must respect standards set by individual professors regarding the use of technology during their class.

In order to address this issue, we must appeal to the integrity of the students as ones who are preparing for a lifetime of ministry to Christ and his church. We expect each student to take personal responsibility for proper classroom technology usage and to encourage others around them to do the same. All RTS-Charlotte students are accountable to the policies stated in the Student Handbook and Academic Catalog and are therefore expected to use technology in the classroom only for appropriate class-related activities. Student conduct is under the supervision of the Dean of Students.

Van Dixhoorn Classroom Technology Policy

I'm joining the ranks of those strongly discouraging laptop computers from class, although tablets are fine. Even the godliest, most focused student find screens a distraction, including the screens of others. Moreover, recent research has plausibly suggested that students learn better when taking notes by hand. If a student can demonstrate that not using a computer will cause hardship or inhibit learning, I'll happily consider their argument. Abuse of laptops (using them for a purpose other than note-taking) will result in my request that the laptop not be used by the student for the remainder of the semester. Unless there is an emergency, please also forebear the use of cell phones.

Course Objectives Related to MDiv* Student Learning Outcomes

Course: PT 5325: Church Polity
 Professor: Chad Van Dixhoorn
 Campus: RTS Charlotte
 Date: Fall 2026

<u>MDiv* Student Learning Outcomes</u> <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> <i>*As the MDiv is the core degree at RTS, the MDiv rubric will be used in this syllabus.</i>		<u>Rubric</u> Strong Moderate Minimal None	<u>Mini-Justification</u>
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.	Strong	1. Principles of Presbyterian polity 2. Biblical foundations for Presbyterian polity 3. Principles of parliamentary procedure
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.)	Strong	Emphasis on biblical basis for Presbyterian polity
Reformed Theology	Significant knowledge of Reformed theology and practice, with emphasis on the Westminster Standards.	Strong	Concerted study of classical Reformed and Presbyterian ecclesiology
Sanctification	Demonstrates a love for the Triune God that aids the student's sanctification.	Moderate	Application of church government to evangelism and missions is made in class
Worldview	Burning desire to conform all of life to the Word of God. Includes ability to interact within a denominational context, within the broader worldwide church, and with significant public issues.	Minimal	Course subject matter primarily delimited to church government
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	Alternate polities presented charitably, fairly
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.	Moderate	Role of elders, courts of church in shepherding, discipline is stressed; Students read <i>Directory for Worship</i> in the BCO