

# St. Peter Presbyterian Church Constitution

May 20, 2006

## **PREAMBLE:**

We, the members of St. Peter Presbyterian Church of Bristol, Virginia (SPPC), do hereby establish and submit ourselves to the following Constitution as a means to govern the affairs of this church.

## **Article I. Name**

This church body shall be known as Saint Peter Presbyterian Church of Bristol, Virginia.

## **Article II. Standards and Objectives**

### **A. Primary Standard:**

St. Peter Presbyterian Church is a body ("corpus", corporation) of Christian believers who are united for the chief purpose of glorifying the Triune God by striving to proclaim and obey His revelation as found in the 66 books of the Holy Scriptures. As the inspired, inerrant, infallible, and comprehensive rule of faith and life for the Christian, the Scriptures are recognized by St. Peter Presbyterian Church as the unchallengeable authority and supreme judge to which all religious controversies or creeds, as well as all opinions and regulations of men, must be subordinate.

### **B. Secondary Standards:**

We affirm the ecumenical creeds of the church: the Apostles Creed, the Nicene Creed, the Athanasian Creed, and the definition of Chalcedon. We also affirm the secondary standards of the historic Reformation Churches: the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647), the Belgic Confession (1561), the Westminster Larger and Shorter Catechisms (1647), the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), and the Canons of Dort (1619).

Should any conflict arise between this Constitution and any of the above standards (or between the above standards themselves), the controlling authority for resolution of the conflict shall be, in this order:

- 1.) Scripture
- 2.) The Secondary Standards denoted above
- 3.) This Constitution

The session is to adjudicate and resolve alleged conflicts or controversies pertaining to such allegations. The session shall always be the first court of adjudication before any recourse is made to higher courts.

### **C. Objectives**

The general objectives of SPPC are to make disciples of all nations, promote submission to God's Word in all areas of human life and endeavor, nurture and educate believers and their households in the Christian faith, administer the sacraments and moral discipline within the church, and lead the congregation in united worship, encouragement, fellowship, and charitable service. SPPC has a special interest in working with other Christian churches and groups throughout our community and the world. We welcome opportunities to labor with them in common goals in the

name of Christ, and we look forward to entering into informal and/or formal fellowship and association with like-minded churches who have common aims, standards, and objectives.

### **Article III. Membership**

#### **A. Initiation of Membership**

1. A household, normally in our geographical region, is eligible for membership when the head of that household has been lawfully baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:19) and does not contradict his profession through his manner of life (Matt. 7:22-23). Membership begins when the covenant membership vows have been taken by the head of the household (Philemon 2; Heb. 13:7,17). The Elders oversee a membership list, which must include names, baptisms, and communicant status.

Our membership vows are:

- Do you acknowledge yourself to be a sinner in need of salvation by Christ, and do you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, receiving and resting upon Him alone as He is offered in the gospel?
- Have you been baptized in accordance with His Word?
- Do you swear in the name of God, in humble reliance upon the grace of the Holy Spirit, to live in a way that becomes followers of Christ?
- Do you swear in the name of God to support the ministry of this church in its worship and work, submitting to its government and discipline, while pursuing its purity and peace?

When the vows are presented to the head of a household, he will also be asked if he speaks on behalf of his household. When these vows are taken, the congregation will respond with “*Amen*” when they are asked:

As a congregation of Christ, do you receive [this Christian/these Christians] into the covenant fellowship of this local church together with you, renewing your membership vows as you do so?”

Those family members under his covenantal headship (wife and children living at home) are also members, with the following exception: Any of those older family members under his covenantal headship (wife or older children living at home) who, in the determination of the Elders, lacks a credible profession of faith (in either belief or life) in the Lord Jesus Christ, or who expresses a well-reasoned and sincere desire not to become a member of SPPC, will not be accepted into membership.

2. Any wife of a non-Christian who has signed the membership covenant is a member. In addition, those family members under her covenantal headship (children living at home) are also members, with the following exceptions: Any of her older children who, in the determination of the Elders, lacks a credible profession of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, or who expresses a well-reasoned and sincere desire not to be a member of SPPC, will not be accepted into membership.
3. Children born to, or adopted by, member parents, upon baptism will automatically be enrolled as members (1 Cor. 7:14).

#### **B. Expectation of Members**

1. Members of SPPC shall devote themselves to both the private and public means of grace including the regular attendance of church services and congregational meetings.
2. Members of SPPC shall, in obedience to the Word of God and as a token of God's gift to us, tithe cheerfully and regularly to the ministry and labor of this church.
3. Members of SPPC shall recognize, respect, and submit to the Elders of SPPC in obedience to Hebrews 13:17.

### **C. Voting Members**

1. All male members in good standing of SPPC who are married or who are at least twenty years of age (Num. 1:2-3, 18, 30ff; 14:29; 26:2, 4; Ex. 30:14; 38:26; 2 Chron. 25:5), who are in regular attendance at SPPC and who, in the determination of the Elders, are capable of sound judgment, are eligible to vote in matters relating to SPPC, and are expected to exercise the franchise. Each will, regardless of family size, have one vote.
2. Notwithstanding point #1, the heads of households shall endeavor to hear and understand the views of their entire family on matters to be discussed by the heads of households, being covenantal representatives of them (1 Peter 3:7).
3. In the event that a woman is the head of her household, the elders shall seek to inform her on all issues requiring a vote and she shall be granted a vote for her household, communicating their concerns, opinions and vote by way of the session.

#### 4. Suspension of Voting Privilege

- a. Any person suspended from full participation in the Lord's Table shall also have his voting rights suspended until such time as he is restored to the Table.
- b. Any person who changes his beliefs or practices so as no longer to be in accord with the membership covenant of SPPC may have his voting privilege suspended.

### **D. Termination of Membership**

The names of members shall be removed from the rolls of the church only by order of the Elders on the basis of death, dismissal to the care of another church, transfer to another church, moral discipline, or in cases where the member can no longer be found, erasure (which is a form of discipline), from the roll.

## **Article IV. Heads of Households Meetings**

### **A. Purpose**

Heads of households meetings shall normally be convened for one of four purposes:

1. The selection of Elders and Deacons.
2. The consideration of any changes to this document.

3. Informational meetings to discuss items selected by the Elders or Deacons. This shall include an annual meeting held in the first quarter of each year to discuss the finances of the church, including an annual budget.
4. The removal from office of Elders or Deacons.

## **B. Manner in Which Called and Conducted**

1. The congregation shall normally be advised by the Elders of heads of households meetings at least two weeks in advance of such meetings.
2. The meeting shall be called and chaired by the Elders.
3. Women are encouraged to attend congregational meetings important to the life and direction of the church. Their attendance serves to facilitate communication with their husbands at home about the issues that these meetings are called to discuss. Wives are normally sound and needed counselors to their husbands, and their assistance in this regard will be aided by their attendance at such meetings. Additionally, the prayers of all in the church are sought relative to whatever matters may be being considered, and women's prayers for the church are better informed and more effectual when they are knowledgeable as to the present matters before the government of the church.
4. Older children are also encouraged to attend these meetings, that they might better understand the functioning of Christ's church, and offer up prayers for the same to their Father in Heaven.
5. Heads of households not present may vote by proxy.
6. Minutes of these meetings shall be kept, either in writing or by means of audiotape.

## **Article V. Officers**

### **A. Ordination**

1. Ordination is the authoritative admission of one called to an office in the Church, accompanied with examination, prayer and the laying on of hands.
2. Those who have been recognized by the church to have been called and equipped by God to hold office in the church are to be ordained by the session.
3. Any ordination must be in accordance with the constitution and by-laws of the presbytery.
4. Only males shall be admitted to ordination and church office.
5. The offices requiring ordination are:
  - a. Teaching Elder (pastor)
  - b. Ruling Elder
  - c. Deacon
6. Saint Peter Presbyterian Church distinguishes ordination from commissioning or licensure. The church invests a man with ecclesiastical office (whether a deacon, ruling elder, or teaching elder) by the rite of ordination and the laying on of hands. Ordination of an elder confers the office of elder, which, together with the other elders [session], entails responsibility for church administration, caring for the flock, preaching the word, and administering the sacraments. The session may from time to time carry out their responsibility by commissioning or licensing qualified men (usually trainees or retirees) to preach the word and administer sacraments under the sessions' watch and care.

## **B. Powers and Duties of the Officers**

1. The authority and duties of the Elders shall, in general, be those entailed in pursuing or securing the aims and objectives of the church. (1Pet 5:1-2; Eph.4:11-12; 1Tim. 5:17; Matt. 28:19-20; 1Cor. 11-23-26; 1 Cor. 5:1-5; Jas. 5:14-15).
2. The duties of the Deacons shall be, in general, to manage the financial, physical, social and benevolent functions of the church, under the oversight of the Elders (Acts 6:1-7).

## **C. Initiation of Office**

1. Any member of SPPC, including an officer, may notify the Elders of a man they think should be trained and evaluated as a potential officer.
2. Should the Elders concur with this recommendation, they will train and evaluate the man for office in the church. As part of this process, the Elders will examine him with regard to his doctrine, manner of life, and agreement with SPPC's secondary standards. All candidates must meet the qualifications for office set down in Scripture (1 Tim. 3:1-7; Tit. 1:5-9; 1 Pet. 5:2-4; 1 Tim. 3:8-13).
3. If, after this process of evaluation and training, the Elders believe the man may be called to serve as an officer at SPPC, they shall consult the congregation by means of an election.
4. Prior to the election, the Elders shall convene at least two public forums at which the candidate can be asked questions by the congregation.
5. The election shall consist of the heads of households voting "approve," or "disapprove."
6. If the candidate receives 2/3 approval of those casting ballots, the Elders will ordain and/or install him through laying on hands and prayer during a subsequent Lord's Day worship service.

## **D. Term of Office**

The offices of Elder and Deacon are perpetual in nature. This can be argued, first, from the nature of God's call, as without repentance (Rom. 11:29), second, the character of God's gifting, as abiding (which gifts increase in fruitfulness and effectiveness with their exercise), and, third, the express absence in Scripture of any warrant for limited term of office/ordination. This perpetuity of office is for life, barring the exceptions of: deposition by disciplinary action, proving destitute of gifts, an incapacitating sickness or infirmity, or a move from locality. However, some men may become inactive in their office for a period of time (see Section E "Resignation from Office or Leave of Absence").

## **E. Removal From Office**

1. An Elder or a Deacon may be removed from office if his services do not appear to be edifying to the cause of Christ, or if he has violated his ordination vows. The Elders may perceive the need for removal of an officer, and then communicate this to the congregation.
2. Members of the congregation may perceive the need for removal of an officer, and then communicate this to the Elders.
3. The Elders shall notify the officer of the perception of the need for his removal. He shall be given opportunity to present his case for remaining in office to the Elders.

4. If the Elders desire to proceed with removal, or simply to present the case to the congregation, they shall then call a heads of households meeting and give their evaluation of the need for removal. The congregation shall then vote on removal, either at that meeting or a subsequent one. Removal from office shall require a 3/4 vote of those present, plus the concurrence of the Elders, the officer in question not being allowed to vote on the matter.

## **F. Resignation from Office or Leave of Absence**

If an Elder or Deacon desires to resign his office or take a leave of absence, he must present a letter to the Elders formally making known his request and explaining his reasons. Acceptance of a resignation or approval of a leave of absence will be granted only for reasons deemed weighty by the Elders.

The Elders may notify the congregation of their receipt of the letter, and may provide for a period of comment by the congregation. They may also call a Head of Households meeting to discuss the matter. If the Elders approve the request, they shall notify the congregation of their actions.

The man authorized for a leave of absence will be reinstated to the full function of the office only by the approval of the Elders. Should a man that has resigned his office seek to return, he can be reinstated after following the provisions in Section V. B. of the Constitution.

If a resignation or leave of absence is sought for reasons of moral or doctrinal defect or corruption, then the Elders may exercise biblical discipline prior to, or in conjunction with, any consideration of the letter of resignation or leave of absence.

## **Article VI. Discipline**

### **A. Informal Discipline**

The ordinary course of discipline is informal. Members are encouraged to self-discipline, overlooking the failings of others in love (1 Pet. 4:8), and encouraging other members to covenant faithfulness (Matt. 18:15).

### **B. Formal Discipline**

Formal church discipline is applied through the formal action and unanimous judgment of the Elders. The pattern of church discipline, except in cases of scandal requiring immediate action, will generally include formal private admonishment by two or three (Matt. 18:16), formal public admonishment and suspension from the Supper (2 Thes. 3:14-15), and a formal hearing which may result in excommunication (Matt. 18:17).

### **C. Subjects of Formal Discipline**

Any member may be disciplined by the church. Christians who attend church regularly, but are non-members, are subject to pastoral admonishment from the church, and while not subject to the formal discipline of the church, may be refused the sacrament of the Lord's Supper without full process. If another church has disciplined one of its members, and that person subsequently comes to SPPC, the

Elders will decide whether to honor the discipline of the other church after due consultation with the person concerned and after all appropriate information is sought from the disciplining church.

#### **D. Initial Procedures of Formal Discipline**

The Elders shall establish the specific procedures for all formal discipline on a case-by-case basis, as appropriate to the circumstances and individuals involved. However, at minimum these procedures should include a clear and timely warning of the individual that he is in the process of formal discipline, two or three visits or communications involving two or three witnesses, and clear records and/or minutes of the entire proceedings kept by the Elders.

#### **E. Trial Procedures**

When the Elders determine that a hearing is necessary, they will establish the specific procedures for each trial on a case-by-case basis, as appropriate to the circumstances and individuals involved. However, at minimum these procedures should include informing the accused in writing of the specific charges, the time, place, and date of the trial, and ample time for the accused to prepare a defense.

The heads of households meeting will be informed of the hearing at the first opportunity. At the hearing, one of the Elders will present a solemn charge from the Scriptures on the responsibilities of those present, the evidence against the accused will be presented, and the accused will have time to make a reasonable defense, including the right to question any witnesses.

At a separate meeting of the Elders, a vote will be taken on each of the charges. The Elders will declare their verdict to the congregation on an appointed Lord's day, following an appropriate exhortation. The accused will be given a written copy of the verdict.

The Elders will establish an official file containing all the records pertaining to the hearing, including all pertinent correspondence, transcripts, and minutes. If he requests it, the accused will be given one copy of this file at the expense of the church. Any appeals to presbytery will be conducted in accordance with the Constitution of the Confederation of Reformed Evangelical Churches.

#### **F. Restoration from Formal Discipline**

Excommunication will end when the unanimous opinion of the Elders is that the one under discipline has repented. A confession of this repentance will be read to the congregation on the Lord's Day, and the Elders shall formally announce the end of the discipline and restoration of fellowship.

#### **Article VII. Property**

A. All property shall be held in the name of St. Peter Presbyterian Church.

B. Since the Scriptures affirm that the tithe is to be given to the Elders of the church, and since the Elders direct the use of all tithe moneys and gifts to the church, upon dissolution of SPPC, its property and resources shall be held jointly by the officers, and administered by the Elders for the purpose of advancing Christ's kingdom on earth.

#### **Article VIII. Modification of the Constitution**

Amendments to this Constitution may only be made in the following manner:

1. Approval of the amendment by unanimous consent of the Elders.
2. A first and second reading at two consecutive Heads of Household meetings, with review and comment from the congregation.
3. Formalization and ratification by unanimous vote of the Elders.

## **Article IX. Confederational Affiliation**

### **A. Membership in the Confederation of Reformed Evangelical Churches (CREC)**

SPPC is currently seeking membership in the CREC.

### **B. The Constitution of the Confederation of Reformed Evangelical Churches**

The then-current version of the Constitution of the Confederation of Reformed Evangelical Churches will be incorporated into this Constitution when SPPC is received as a member church of the CREC.