



**PRESBYTERIAN  
POLITY  
FOR  
CHURCH LEADERS**  
Fourth Edition

JOAN S. GRAY  
and  
JOYCE C. TUCKER

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# CONTENTS

Foreword by Cynthia M. Campbell	xi
Introduction	xvii
Chapter One—A Polity for the Church	1
What Is Polity?	1
Fundamentals of Presbyterian Polity	4
The Powers and Responsibilities of Councils	9
Chapter Two—Calling to Leadership in the Church	11
The Calling to Church Membership	11
Church Membership as Ministry	13
Calling to Leadership	14
Qualifications and Gifts of Church Leaders	15
Ordination and Sexual Orientation	16
Ordination to Ordered Ministries	17
Freedom of Conscience and Its Limitations	19
Chapter Three—Election of Church Leaders	21
The Nominating Committee	21
Election, Preparation, and Examination of Ruling Elders and Deacons	22
Calling a Pastor	24
Presbyteries Working Together	25
Chapter Four—The Ordered Ministry of Ruling Elder	28
Early Reformers	28
The Church in Scotland	29
Early Presbyterianism in America	31
The 1788 Form of Government	31
Advocacy for the Ordered Ministry of Ruling Elder	33
Parity in Governance	35
Chapter Five—The Ordered Ministry of Deacon	37
The Ordered Ministry of Deacon in the Reformed Tradition	37
The 1788 Constitution	38
Encouraging Churches to Institute the Ordered Ministry of Deacon	39
Recovering the Essence of the Ordered Ministry of Deacon	41
Deacons in the Current Form of Government	42

Chapter Six—A First Look at the Session	44
An Overview of Responsibilities and Powers	44
Gathering the Community of Faith	47
A Continuing Responsibility for Members	50
A Continuing Responsibility for Church Leaders	53
Chapter Seven—Teaching Elders Serving Congregations	55
The Ordered Ministry of Teaching Elder	56
Continuing Members of Presbytery	57
Permanent Pastoral Relationships	58
Dissolving Permanent Pastoral Relationships	59
Temporary Pastoral Relationships	59
The Distinctive Role of the Pastor	60
Chapter Eight—Leaders and Staff Working Together	63
Pastors and Ruling Elders Working Together	64
Joint Responsibilities for Worship	64
Joint Responsibilities for Congregational Care	65
Joint Responsibilities for Governance	66
Pastors, Deacons, and Ruling Elders Working Together	66
Staff Relationships within the Church	67
The Session’s Personnel Responsibilities	68
Chapter Nine—Leading the Church in Mission	69
The Nature of Mission	69
Facets of the Church’s Mission	71
Beyond Polity	77
An Ecumenical Note	78
Chapter Ten—Presbytery, Synod, and the General Assembly	80
More-Inclusive Councils	80
Presbytery	84
Synod	88
The General Assembly	90
Commissions and Committees	92
Chapter Eleven—Stewardship, Finance, and Property	95
The Grace of Stewardship	95
Presbyterian Stewardship	97
Stewardship Development and the Session	100
Stewardship and Financial Management	101
The Session and Church Property	106
Incorporation and Trustees	109

Chapter Twelve—Meetings of Councils and of the Congregation	111
The Importance of Meetings	111
Consensus and Conflict	112
Types of Meetings	114
Moderators and Clerks	114
Parliamentary Procedure	116
Congregational Meetings	117
Meetings of the Session	119
Meetings of Presbytery	119
Meetings of Synod	120
Meetings of the General Assembly	121
Chapter Thirteen—Preserving Peace and Purity	125
Conflict in the Church	125
Ground Rules for Dealing with Conflict	126
Options for Disagreement—Dissent and Protest	129
What Is “Discipline”?	130
Judicial Process	131
Trials and Appeals	136
Chapter Fourteen—Leading the Church in Worship	139
The Directory for Worship	139
What Is Worship?	140
The Elements of Worship	141
The Order of Worship	143
The Physical Nature of Worship	143
The Font and the Table	145
Worship on Special Occasions	148
Worship and Christian Life	149
Responsibilities for Worship	149
Notes	153
Index of <i>Book of Order</i> References	157

# FOREWORD

Why are things in the church the way they are and not some other way? This book seeks not only to describe the government of the Presbyterian Church but also to explain some of the reasons for things being as they are. In addition to history, tradition, and convenience, there are also reasons that grow out of our understanding of the nature of the Christian faith. Certain fundamental convictions derived from the reading of Scripture have helped to shape the *Book of Order* and the Presbyterian Church into what they are today.

Is this form of government taught in Scripture? Almost all churches look to Scripture to justify their particular forms and orders. Rather than trying to use Scripture to justify the particular provisions or even the ordered ministries of the church, it is more helpful to observe the ways in which some of the fundamental affirmations of the Reformed faith find expression in our church's government. It is difficult to decide which came first, theological understanding or form of government. In Calvin's own writing and work these two were very closely related. The development of this new way of being the church called "Reformed" can scarcely be separated from the development of a new system of theological reflection. Indeed, we can see influence flowing both ways: (a) Particular affirmations of faith are lived out in church order, and (b) the lived experience of Reformed Christians has shaped the theological stance. In what follows, I will suggest several convictions about God and the Christian life that find clear expression in the Presbyterian form of government. Others could have been chosen or added, but these form the core of a theological answer to the question: Why are things in the Presbyterian Church the way they are?

*The Covenant.* The idea of the covenant has long influenced the Reformed way of viewing God and God's relationship with humanity. Out of their conviction that what God began with Israel God completed in Jesus Christ, Calvin and others found in the covenants of the Old Testament the foundation for the Christian life. The covenant image was so powerful because it reminded Calvin that initiative in salvation, as in creation, lay entirely with God: It was *God* who called Israel, *God* who chose Abraham and Sarah, *God* who gave the law through Moses to the people. Each act was an act of grace, not done because any had deserved it; in each case it was God who sought out people with whom to have a relationship.

Such a notion of the primacy of divine initiative and grace lies at the heart of the Reformed understanding of the church. We do not “join” the church of our choosing; rather, we are called by God into relationship. In the language of faith, we are sought before we ourselves find. It is this conviction that undergirds the Reformed emphasis on “infant” baptism. As God made covenant with Abraham and Sarah and their offspring, so God elects or chooses us before we are conscious that there is a God to choose. As church members, then, we do not depend on our agreement with one another in matters of belief or practice to keep us together. We are together because we believe that God has called each of us and that therefore we can and should live together.

This conviction of being called to life together is the second aspect of the covenant theme. The covenants of the Old Testament created the people of Israel; in the New Testament the covenant sealed in the blood of Christ created the church. Individuals are called of God, but they are always called *into* community with one another. However much we would prefer to go it alone, the Christian life is always life together. While this is a conviction shared by almost all Christians, it has led Reformed Christians into particular ways of ordering church life.

Not infrequently you will hear people complain about the never-ending use of committees in the Presbyterian Church; frustrated members and pastors sometimes say, “If you want something done right, do it yourself.” The notion that we are called to *be* together has led Presbyterians to conclude that this is how we should make decisions: not independently or unilaterally, but together. This is as true within the life of a local congregation as it is for the denomination as a whole. Decisions are shared among the various members or councils for the good of the whole, because *together* we are the body of Christ.

*The Law.* As noted above, one of the highlights of God’s covenant making with Israel was the gift of the law. The Ten Commandments and the laws that flowed from them gave form or shape to the nation of Israel. The law made life together just, humane, and possible. To be sure, the law was abused: not only was it violated, but also the keeping of the law was used to assure individuals of their worthiness or righteousness. Calvin joined Luther in asserting that human beings were made righteous (or set in right relationship with God) by God’s grace alone and not by any human works, even by keeping God’s law. Calvin, however, retained a rather more positive view of the law itself than did Luther. He saw it as a gift of grace that could provide an orderly means for people to live together under God. The order of law provided the environment in which people could grow together in grace.

Since an ordered life is crucial for growth, it is small wonder that various forms of government and order have played such a central place in the life

of Reformed or Presbyterian churches. The *Book of Order* is *not* a manual of operations. It is a way of making Christian life in community possible. (It is not the only way, to be sure, but one that generations have found conducive to the nurture of faith.) *The Book of Order* is to be studied and learned by those who are leaders in the church because of their responsibility to guide and guard that life together.

Included in the *Book of Order* are the Rules of Discipline. These are procedures to be followed when there is serious difficulty in the life of the church. The intention of these regulations, however, must be carefully noted: discipline in the church is to be exercised for “building up the body of Christ, not for destroying it, for redeeming, not for punishing” [D-1.0102]. The same could be said of the entire form of government: these provisions are gifts that can enable orderly and peaceful life together.

*Sin.* As Luther and Calvin both pointed out, one of the functions of the law of God was to convict humanity of its sin. Judged by that standard of righteousness, no one is innocent. This conviction of the pervasiveness of sin even in the lives of believers stands at the heart of the Reformed faith. Many who see this as a gloomy doctrine fail to recognize that it must always be held alongside the unshakable conviction that we *have been justified* by the redemptive work of God in Christ. But on this side of the fulfillment of the kingdom, the world, believers and unbelievers alike, will be subject to the consequences of human sin.

Such a theological affirmation has led to two convictions about the church and decision making that we experience every day as Presbyterians. First, the Reformers assumed that not even the church was immune from the effects of human sin. Because the church was made up of human beings and because all humans have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, the Reformers held that it could and did make errors of judgment and worse. The Reformation itself was an attempt precisely to reform and purify the church of its more obvious abuses of ecclesiastical and political power. Those same Reformers were not so naive as to assume that the reformed church would not become subject to similar abuses in time. Thus came the motto first used in the Dutch Reformed Church: *Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda*—the church reformed, always to be reformed. This is a commitment to continual self-examination, to the recognition that good policies do not always produce good results and that “new occasions teach new duties.” Reformations are never easy, and change always brings a certain amount of conflict. The *Book of Order* is one means of ordering change and conflict so that minority views are always heard and so that petitions to amend or to redress grievance can always be presented in a civil manner. These procedures for change allow the church to be reformed under the leading of God in each new day.



The second implication of the doctrine of human sinfulness relates to the corporate nature of decision making discussed above. Because it is assumed that all persons will be subject to personal and selfish interest, it is a hallmark of the Presbyterian order that power and decision making are never vested in individuals acting alone. The powers of a pastor acting alone are severely restricted; the power and authority in a Presbyterian congregation rest with the session of which the pastor is a member. The reason that Presbyterians have always been skeptical about the office of bishop is the potential abuse that could result from vesting too much authority in one person. In contrast the presbytery is often called the “corporate bishop,” because it is a representative body of constituent congregations and ministers that makes decisions concerning the life and mission of the church in a given area. The conviction that sin is both real and inevitable has led Reformed Christians to the conclusion that the decisions that we make together will most often be better than the decisions that any one of us could make individually.

*Called to Serve.* Having stressed the reality of human sin, Presbyterians have not found this sufficient reason for withdrawing from the world or from relations with others. Indeed, the effect of the justifying grace of God is precisely to lead persons into relationship with one another and into mission in the world. Those whom God has called have been given grace to amend their lives and the responsibility to serve God and others. Whether in sending evangelists to Korea or Zaire, sharing the poverty of Native Americans on various reservations, or building schools and colleges across the nation, Presbyterians have felt called to act out their faith in God’s grace in the world around them. This has sometimes led to conflict in the church: What are the priorities for mission? Where does service end and political action begin? How much money should be spent for what?

The Presbyterian system of government is intended not only to enable life together in the church but also to facilitate the church’s mission in the world. Each council has a unique role to play in determining the overall mission of the church as well as in developing its own form of service in the particular place in which it finds itself. Because of the corporate nature of the church, what is done by one is done in the name of all. This has led, to be sure, to significant differences of opinion in the church, but it has also enabled the church to act and speak as one in a world hungry for unity.

*The Sovereignty of God.* At its heart, any theological question is a matter of our understanding of God. Who God is and how we understand God’s self-revelation is *the* issue from which all other affirmations of faith flow. For the Reformed tradition, God’s sovereignty and, in particular, the sovereign nature of God’s grace have seemed most compelling. Sovereignty

is a political concept, born in the days when power in the human world was exercised by rulers acting more or less independently and often with unchecked authority. Applied to God, the concept of sovereignty recognizes that God was not under any compulsion but, rather, freely chose to create the world and redeem humankind. Even more, God has created the world and saves individuals without assistance, not even from the individuals concerned.

If God is thus sovereign over both the creation and human destiny, God is likewise sovereign over the church. All authority in the church rightly belongs to God, working through the Holy Spirit; all other authority exercised by persons and groups is derivative. All Christians affirm, of course, that Christ is the head of the church, which is the body of Christ. For Presbyterians this affirmation implies that we can invest in no person or church council the kind of absolute authority or honor that belongs to God alone. Along with the conviction that the church, because it is human, will err, this view of God's sovereignty has led to healthy self-criticism and a general reluctance on the part of church leaders to assume that they are speaking for God.

Another implication of this notion of God's sovereignty is the principle that "God alone is Lord of the conscience" (Westminster Confession of Faith, XXII, 6.109). God alone, and not any church council or nation or any other human authority, has claim on complete human obedience. There are several things that this affirmation does *not* mean. It does not mean that we do not owe allegiance and loyalty to various human institutions; it does not mean that we are not subject to one another in the Lord; it does not mean that to be a Christian is to go off by oneself with Jesus, acting and believing as one wishes. The Christian faith is still to be lived in community with others, where the opinions of others and the will of the majority are to be respected.

The notion of God's sovereignty over human conscience affirms that God, as in days of old, continues to make God's will known directly to particular persons and communities of faith. The conviction that God's will is not confined to the traditions of the church, or even to traditional interpretations of Scripture, has far-reaching consequences. The decision by the Presbyterian Church to ordain women was the result of the conscience of some members convincing the whole church that a traditional interpretation of Scripture was in error and that, in fact, God does call both women and men to service and leadership in the church. Similarly, the conviction that God alone is authoritative in human conscience has led Reformed Christians to defy and/or seek to reform human governments when those governments claimed absolute authority or when their laws compelled Christians to act unjustly (The Theological Declaration of Barmen is an example of the first; the stand of the church on the matters of slavery and sanctuary for refugees may be cited as examples of the second).

The sovereignty of God is finally an affirmation of the sovereignty of God's grace. The love, compassion, and mercy of God for humanity can never be frustrated and have already triumphed in the death and resurrection of Christ. In that alone is our hope—for ourselves, for this world, and for the Presbyterian Church. Confidence in the sovereign grace of God enables us to live together and work out our differences while we recall that the hope of the world does not rest on our shoulders. The government and discipline of the Presbyterian Church have at times become demonic: Procedures have taken precedence over people; supposed purity has led to schism and rejection of each other; order has been used as a club and not a guide. The only thing that can save Presbyterians from confusing the *Book of Order* with God is grace. Only a constant recollection of who made us and brought us together, only the continual affirmation that it is mercy alone by which we live, enable us to make of our form of government what it is: a way of being the church by the grace of God.

Which came first, the order or the theology? That's hard to tell. As Calvin wrote his first rules of discipline he continued to refine his theology. It is the experience of Reformed Christians living in the world under the Word of God that has brought both doctrine and order to the present day. The *Book of Order* is not finished yet, and neither is our task of being faithful to God.

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# INTRODUCTION

“Something old, something new” could very well be a descriptive subtitle for the *Book of Order’s* Foundations of Presbyterian Polity and Form of Government approved in 2011. Those who read them will find many things that sound very familiar with the older versions. Much of the new Foundations of Presbyterian Polity section as well as the new Form of Government use the same wording as their predecessors. The important characteristic principles are still in place. What changed is that there is now much more freedom for councils and congregations to do things in the way that best further their mission instead of hampering it. While the principles are still the same, some of the mandatory provisions of the former Form of Government have been stripped away. This enables churches and councils to experiment, create new things, and generally engage in a process of trial and error to the end that their structures best suit their mission. In church life one size does not fit all, and after many years of a one-size-fits-all polity, it is refreshing to have new options.

As we think about the changes in the Form of Government what comes to mind is the term “white space.” This term comes from the visual arts field. It refers to the portion of a page [of whatever color] without words, graphics, or photographs. White space is an important part of a design; it provides rest to the eye, removes clutter, and gives clarity to what it surrounds. White space allows the viewer to enter into the text or design with more freedom. It is spare and inviting.

The new Form of Government with its lean framework creates white space in our polity. It helps us see the essentials more clearly. It gives us the freedom to create new things in our common life. Going from a densely constructed Form of Government with much mandatory language to one that is elegantly lean does, however, present challenges.

Freedom can be scary. One challenge is learning some new terms. One of these new terms to note is “by rule.” This simply means that each council will decide how to do certain things and record it as the rule of future proceedings. This keeps them from having to decide everything anew at each meeting. What used to be called “governing bodies” are now “councils.” The terms “higher councils” and “more-inclusive councils” refer to the same things and are used interchangeably in this book.

The transition into the current Form of Government may also be challenging because things that used to be specified in the pre-2011 Form of

Government are now left up to the various councils to decide. For instance, it formerly was mandatory that presbyteries review the minutes of sessions annually. This is no longer specified. Instead the review and control functions of councils are expressed, and each council above the session will need to decide how best to fulfill it. This is the pattern for much of the current Form of Government. Functions are specified; forms are not.

Many congregations that did not have written bylaws or operational guidelines before need to write them. The current Form of Government no longer specifies such things as what constitutes adequate notice for special meetings. As congregations and other councils write their bylaws and work to live into this new polity, the stated clerks of the more-inclusive councils can be excellent resources.

“For freedom Christ has set us free!” Freedom that is used to do mission more effectively by the leading of the Holy Spirit is a great thing. We live in a world that desperately needs what only the disciples of Jesus Christ can give. The challenges of our day require new forms and new strategies. This Form of Government gives us the freedom to craft new ways of doing things to reach a new generation for Christ. It may take a good bit of work to get used to all this white space. Change is almost always hard. But once we begin to live into our new freedom we may find the Holy Spirit meeting and empowering us for all kinds of Godly adventures in mission.

This book is written from the perspective of the local congregation. It focuses on those aspects of Presbyterian polity that ordained leaders of a particular church—ruling elders, deacons, and teaching elders—should know to carry out their ministry. It is the hope of the authors that it will prove useful to leaders in training classes and continuing education and perhaps to theological school students as they prepare for service in congregations. While we have tried to suggest the outlines of Presbyterian polity as expressed in the *Book of Order* of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), this volume is not an exhaustive handbook with answers for every question. It is intended, instead, to entice leaders into a deeper study of the book itself.

References to the *Book of Order* or quotes from it are designated throughout the text by section numbers. For example, in the citation G-3.0104, “G” refers to the Form of Government, “3” locates the reference in the third chapter, and “.0104” refers to a particular section. In the Rules of Discipline, the designation “.0000” refers to the entire chapter. For example, D-5.0000 refers to the entire fifth chapter of the Rules of Discipline. References beginning with the letter “F” can be found in the Foundations of Presbyterian Polity, “W” references can be found in the Directory for Worship, and those with the letter “D” in the Rules of Discipline. The *Book of Order* contains a large number of cross-references within the text of particular sections. For this reason, to avoid confusion, the cross-references will be

enclosed by parentheses and the authors' citations from the *Book of Order* will be in brackets. Every ordained leader should have a copy of the most recent edition and check it for new developments.

Churches come in all sizes and shapes, and some particulars of church government vary depending on the complexity of each organization. We have tried to sketch the boundaries and outline the general pattern of Presbyterian polity, hoping that within these boundaries leaders will find creative ways to make the system work in their own church. All the information given here may not apply to every congregation at a given time, but what is included is here because it may prove useful to some churches in certain circumstances.

Our polity is created to run on trust. It is predicated on the notion that disciples of Jesus Christ come together to seek the will of God with good will, Christian humility, and forbearance. The system was never meant to be a tight system of laws that kept us from ever having to think things through or engage in discernment. One of the best investments we can make in the years ahead is to build trust in our congregations, sessions, and higher councils.

Finally, while this is a book tightly focused on the polity of our church, knowing polity is only a means to an end. The end is that, above all else, members of councils should seek God's will themselves and lead the whole church in that path. This is the highest and most important function of church leaders. Ruling elders, deacons, and teaching elders are spiritual leaders. In addition to knowing polity and theology, they must be versed in Scripture, be fervent and frequent in prayer, and be practicing the time-tested spiritual disciplines of the faith. Without these things at the core of a leader's life, polity is empty; it may even become destructive.

We offer this book with thanks for the privilege of serving as leaders in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and in the hope that in some small way it may be used to give glory to God and to build up the church of Jesus Christ.

## Chapter One

# A POLITY FOR THE CHURCH

Jill McLauren was looking over a list of classes for adults being offered by her church. Among the listings was a course called “Presbyterian Polity.” “Polity,” she mused. “I wonder what that is.”

The session of Crosslake Presbyterian Church had spent more than an hour debating whether to permit smoking on the church grounds. As time for adjournment drew near and no consensus was in sight, one of the ruling elders moved that the question be put to the congregation for a vote. The moderator ruled the motion out of order, but several ruling elders objected. “We have not been able to come to agreement about this, so why not let the congregation decide?”

The business meeting of the session of Springs Presbyterian Church was winding down. Stan Wasylykiv had just been elected commissioner to an upcoming meeting of presbytery. At this meeting several controversial issues were going to be debated. When the agenda was completed, the moderator asked for a motion to adjourn. “Wait a minute!” said a ruling elder. “We haven’t given Stan any instructions about how he should vote at the presbytery meeting. As our delegate he needs to know what we want him to do.”

### **What Is Polity?**

Although the church was founded by Jesus Christ and is uniquely spiritual in character, it is also a human organization. Organizations require structure and a system of agreed-upon rules in order to carry out their tasks. Every organized group functions under rules or bylaws of some sort, even though they may be informal and unwritten. The larger the organization and the more complex its task, the more important it is that its structure and rules be efficient and flexible.

The system of rules that governs a church is called its “polity.” While there is an almost endless variety of belief and practice among Christian

churches today, church polities can be roughly divided into three basic kinds. These are called congregational, episcopal, and presbyterian.

*Congregational Polity.* Direct government of the church by the people who make up the congregation characterizes the congregational style of polity. The final authority on any question is the vote of a majority of the members of that particular congregation. Each local church is autonomous; it functions without any outside control. No other church body can tell a church with this kind of polity what to do or to believe. Each congregation has its own bylaws and is sovereign in dealing with matters within its fellowship.

While churches of this kind may belong to certain associations or conventions made up of like-minded congregations, they still guard their independence jealously. It has been said, for instance, that while there are many Baptist churches (holding generally recognized Baptist doctrine), there is no Baptist Church. Congregations may cooperate to support a theological seminary or send missionaries to other countries, but their unity is strictly functional and voluntary.

Congregational polity comes close to being pure democracy in action. Frequent meetings of the congregation are held in which the business of the church is transacted. The congregation votes on whether or not to receive new members and sets the conditions for their membership. The congregation hires and fires the minister and other staff members. The congregation approves the church budget and votes on significant unbudgeted expenses. All matters of policy are decided by the congregation. Most churches with congregational polity do have a board of laypeople (often called deacons) who administer the will of the congregation and make recommendations to it, but finally it is the congregation that governs the life of the church.

Adherents to congregational polity point to primitive Christianity as their model. During the days of the apostles and for some time afterward, there was little or no formal connection between congregations. Individually they elected their own officers, ran their own affairs by the vote of the members, and engaged only in the very loosest sort of association with other churches. Personal and written contacts with the apostles and a common faith in the risen Christ held these early congregations together.

Congregational church government also rests on the belief that the influence of the Holy Spirit shows itself in the church primarily through the views and opinions of individual members speaking within the context of the particular congregation. What one congregation hears the Spirit saying to it is not necessarily what is being heard by another; therefore, each reserves the right to do what seems appropriate in its own situation. Almost without exception all Baptist churches have a congregational form



of polity. Other churches that are congregational to a greater or lesser degree are the Disciples of Christ, the United Church of Christ, and various Pentecostal denominations.

*Episcopal Polity.* This form of church government takes its name from the Greek word for bishop: *episkopos*, literally “shepherd.” While congregational polity gives virtually all authority to the congregation, in episcopal polity power is lodged in the highest-ranking bishop and is delegated downward through the clergy.

One important facet of episcopal polity is the doctrine of “apostolic succession.” Simply stated, this is the belief that those who are ordained as clergy stand in an unbroken line of authority going back to Jesus and the apostles. Christ empowered his apostles to carry on the ministry and teaching of the church. It is this power, derived from the church’s founder, that the bishops exercise.

Various rankings of clergy are also a facet of the episcopal system. In some churches, the office of bishop may be the only rank above that of parish clergy. A bishop is in authority over a number of congregations in a given area, often called a diocese. In other churches, such as the Roman Catholic Church, there are numerous ranks, including those of bishop, archbishop, cardinal, and pope. Power is apportioned according to rank in the church, with some functions also being reserved for certain officers. Bishops ordain clergy, for example. This apportionment of power and function provides for control of and uniformity among the various congregations. While there may be some latitude for local preferences, for the most part the liturgy, doctrine, and practice of congregations with strict episcopal polity vary little within the denomination.

Denominations with episcopal polity include the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox churches. The Methodist, Wesleyan, and Anglican churches depart in a number of ways from strict episcopal polity, especially in giving more authority to laypersons. Their use of the office of bishop, however, qualifies them for inclusion in this category.

*Presbyterian Polity.* The name of our church, “Presbyterian,” refers not to our doctrine or beliefs but to how we govern ourselves. Presbyterian polity takes its name from the Greek word *presbuteros*, meaning one having great age. “Presbyter,” an English word derived from this Greek term, refers both to teaching and ruling elders as leaders in the church. Each of our congregations is governed by a group of presbyters elected by the congregation and known as the session.

Presbyterians recognize that the Scriptures do not contain a detailed plan for church government; in spite of this, Presbyterians (along with other Christian churches) have always sought to base their polity on

principles found in the Bible. The *Book of Order* states that “Scripture teaches us of Christ’s will for the Church, which is to be obeyed” [F-1.0203].

In keeping with this idea, the ordered ministries of our church—presbyter (ruling and teaching elders) and deacon—are ones for which there is clear precedent in Scripture. Acts 6:1–6 tells of the origin of an ordered ministry like that of deacon to meet a need in the early church. The Scripture establishes this ministry as one of service to those in need.

The New Testament also shows evidence of the use of the ordered ministry of presbyter or elder. The writer of 1 Timothy gives detailed instructions as to the character and qualifications of those who would aspire to this role (1 Tim. 3:1–7; 5:17–22). The book of James instructs those who are sick in the church to call the elders to pray for them (Jas. 5:14). First Peter 5:1–10 is an exhortation to the elders in several churches in Asia. Acts 14:23 speaks of Paul and Barnabas ordaining “elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting.”

Presbyterians believe that the New Testament uses the words “bishop” and “elder” to refer to the same ordered ministry. This can be seen in Titus 1:5 and 1:7, as well as in Acts 20:17, 28.<sup>1</sup> Thus, there is no hierarchy of presbyters in the Presbyterian Church; teaching and ruling elders differ only in the functions they are called to perform. When functioning together in councils, they are equals. We do not have individuals serving under the title of bishop in our denomination. At meetings of the church councils, all presbyters stand on the same footing, and decisions are made by majority vote of the whole body. Even those elected to be officers of governing bodies, moderators and clerks, have no individual authority outside the body. Their only power is that which has been assigned to them for their term of office by the council that elected them.

Another principle of our polity derived from Scripture is that power within the church is to be exercised by groups of leaders rather than individuals. Both Old and New Testaments refer to gatherings of leaders that exercised government over the people (Deut. 27:1; 2 Sam. 5:3; Acts 15:6).<sup>2</sup> We believe that the Holy Spirit speaks most clearly on matters of government through the prayerful deliberations of groups of presbyters. While the decisions of groups are also prone to be fallible, Presbyterian polity holds that groups are generally less likely to fall into error than are individuals. Therefore most decisions in our church are made by ordained leaders organized into groups called *councils*.

### **Fundamentals of Presbyterian Polity**

Presbyterian churches are found the world over, and the details of their polity differ somewhat to accommodate differences in culture and circumstance. There are, however, at least three fundamental characteristics without which a system of church government could hardly be called

presbyterian. Ours is a polity that is representative, constitutional, and relational.

*Presbyterian polity is representative.* The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is governed by groups of presbyters elected by the people. One of the rights of the Presbyterian congregation is that of electing its own installed leaders [G-2.0102]. Therefore, no higher council can instruct a congregation to install a particular man or woman in a permanent ordered ministry against its will. This power is exercised under the oversight of the session and the presbytery, and in certain cases the session or presbytery can exercise a “veto power” over the congregation’s decisions. If the congregation elects a ruling elder who cannot pass the ordination examination given by the session or one whom the session finds morally unacceptable, the session can refuse to ordain that person. Also the congregation votes to call a pastor and establishes the pastor’s terms of call, but the presbytery may refuse to approve either the person or the terms of call if it finds them unacceptable. This system of government by leaders duly elected by the people is a primary difference between our polity and congregational or episcopal polity.

The congregation in Presbyterian churches governs in ways that are strictly limited. The congregation elects leaders who govern the church. These leaders, serving as the session, are responsible for making most decisions relating to the congregation’s life and welfare. This is why, as in the situation outlined at the beginning of the chapter, it would not be advisable for the congregation to vote on whether smoking should be permitted on church property. This is a matter of policy relating to the use of church property, and responsibility for making such policies rests with the session [G-3.0201c].

Leaders elected by congregations or councils to serve in more-inclusive councils cannot be told how to vote. Our leaders must be free to listen for the word of Christ to his church. As *commissioners*, therefore, they are independent decision makers, and they cannot be bound to vote according to the wishes of those who elected them. A meeting of commissioners is a deliberative body open to the give-and-take of discussion and to the free working of the Holy Spirit. In contrast, those elected in settings outside the Presbyterian Church to serve as *delegates* to meetings may be instructed beforehand and are then obligated to act in accordance with their instructions. The outcome of a question before a meeting of delegates, say a political convention, may be decided in advance, because delegates generally have no option except to vote as they have been instructed.

Our church does not elect such delegates to serve in councils. Presbyters are to seek the will of Christ for the church. They must not be mirrors reflecting only the will of the people [F-3.0204]. They are finally responsible, not to the congregation, but to Christ, for the decisions they make.

*Presbyterian polity is constitutional.* Our church has a Constitution that seeks to put our beliefs and polity into writing. This Constitution has two parts: the *Book of Confessions* and the *Book of Order* [F-3.04].

A confession, or creed, is an authoritative expression of the Christian faith, or some part of it, expressed by Christians using the language of their own day.

In these statements the church declares to its members and to the world  
 who and what it is,  
 what it believes, and  
 what it resolves to do.

These statements identify the church as a community of people known by its convictions as well as by its actions. They guide the church in its study and interpretation of the Scriptures; they summarize the essence of Reformed Christian tradition; they direct the church in maintaining sound doctrines; they equip the church for its work of proclamation. [F-2.01]

While Jesus Christ, as revealed in Scripture, is the most authoritative standard of our church, confessions are helpful in that they present the teachings of the Bible in relatively concise form. These subordinate standards give us interpretations of biblical doctrines as seen through the eyes of Christians from different times in history. The Barmen Declaration, for instance, was written by Christians facing subjugation by the Nazi movement in Germany.

Our *Book of Confessions* contains the following documents [see F-3.04]:

- The Nicene Creed
- The Apostles' Creed
- The Scots Confession
- The Heidelberg Catechism
- The Second Helvetic Confession
- The Westminster Confession of Faith
- The Larger and Shorter Catechisms
- The Theological Declaration of Barmen
- The Confession of 1967
- The Confession of Belhar
- A Brief Statement of Faith—Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

While those in ordered ministries are not required to agree with everything in these confessions, they are required to

receive and adopt the essential tenets of the Reformed faith as expressed in the confessions of our church as authentic and reliable expositions

of what Scripture leads us to believe and do and to be instructed and led by those confessions as they lead the people of God. [W-4.0404c]

Having a Constitution that includes creeds, confessions, and catechisms takes nothing away from the authority our church gives to the Scripture. Instead, these documents provide voices from the church's history that help us interpret the meaning of the Bible for our own day. They remind us that many Christians lived before us, and they call us to renew our commitment to the faith that is our heritage.

Whereas the *Book of Confessions* deals with what we believe, the *Book of Order* explains the workings of our polity. It seeks to collect and interpret biblical teachings about the church into a system of church government. Along with the Bible and the *Book of Confessions*, the *Book of Order* is one of the standards by which the church makes decisions and carries out its mission.

This part of our Constitution has four sections. They are the Foundations of Presbyterian Polity, the Form of Government, the Directory for Worship, and the Rules of Discipline. The basic principles and rules of our polity are outlined in the Foundations and the Form of Government. Among other things, these sections deal with the nature of the church, its confessions, and its mission. Also addressed are responsibilities of sessions and other councils, the way leaders are elected and ordained, the church's use of its property, the rules for meetings of congregations and councils, and our relationship to churches of other denominations.

The Directory for Worship contains our standards relating to worship (including funerals and weddings), the sacraments, admission to membership in the church, and the church's service in the world. The Rules of Discipline deals primarily with handling conflict and misconduct in the church.

To help readers with the task of interpreting our polity, in 1998 a portion of the Directory for Worship was moved to the Preface of the *Book of Order*. It states that:

In this *Book of Order*

1. "SHALL" and "IS TO BE/ARE TO BE" signify practice that is mandated,
2. "SHOULD" signifies practice that is strongly recommended,
3. "IS APPROPRIATE" signifies practice that is commended as suitable,
4. "MAY" signifies practice that is permissible but not required.
5. ADVISORY HANDBOOK signifies a handbook produced by agencies of the General Assembly to guide synods and presbyteries in procedures related to the oversight of ministry. Such handbooks suggest procedures that are commended, but not required.

This information about interpreting language is helpful in understanding the relative authority of the material.

The need for a Constitution stems in part from the representative nature of our polity. Leaders are elected by the congregation to exercise authority on its behalf. A Constitution that details the precise boundaries of that authority keeps the leaders from assuming powers they were never intended to have. The *Book of Order* is essential equipment for all church leaders because it tells them not only the duties they must fulfill but also the powers they may exercise. Leaders are elected by the congregation to exercise authority on its behalf only as stated in the Constitution.

*Presbyterian polity is relational.* This characteristic of Presbyterian polity is rooted in our belief in the unity of the church. Ephesians 4:5–6 reminds us that all Christians have “one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all.” First Corinthians 12 compares the church to a human body with its many parts, stressing that we are indivisibly bound together in Christ. Another term for this one church is the “church universal.”

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), as a particular denomination of the church universal, tries to reflect this unity through participation in various national and international councils of churches. “It is our membership in the body of Christ that is the source of our ecumenical commitments” (“The Life and Mission Statement of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.),” 1985, par. 27.398). We also join with other denominations in doing the work of God whenever possible. All who come to the Lord’s table are welcome [W-3.0409] to partake of the Lord’s Supper with us. Our Constitution provides for recognizing the ordination of ministers from other denominations who are called to work in our churches [G-2.0505]. With the approval of the presbytery, Presbyterian congregations may join with congregations of other denominations in various forms of joint mission and witness [G-5.05]. In all these ways we seek to make visible the oneness of Christ’s body.

Within itself, our denomination reflects the unity of the church universal through a common system of beliefs and a common polity. These twin ties of faith and government bind particular churches together into the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Our common faith is expressed in Scripture as interpreted by our *Book of Confessions*. Our polity is expressed in the *Book of Order*.

The unity of the church is reflected in our polity in a number of ways. First, there are no independent Presbyterian churches. The very words are antithetical. To be Presbyterian is to be in relationship with other congregations and under the authority of a presbytery. A congregation can hold to Reformed theology while electing to be independent. However, it would hardly be justified in calling itself “Presbyterian,” because that word itself implies the relational character of our polity.

The relational nature of our polity is also clearly reflected in its structure of councils. There are four of these: session, presbytery, synod, and the General Assembly [G-3.0101]. The session governs a particular congregation. A presbytery is composed of all the congregations and teaching elders within a certain geographical district. A synod functions in relation to three or more presbyteries. The General Assembly is the council of the whole denomination. It is one of the historic principles of our polity that the larger part of the Church, or a representation thereof, should govern the smaller [F-3.0203]. This means that more-inclusive councils have the power of review and control over less-inclusive ones.

Concerns and business also move upward from one council to another through the overture process. An overture is a request for consideration of a problem, for an action to be taken, or for a change to be made in some area of the church's life. Many changes to our *Book of Order* originate through the overture process. Presbyteries may send overtures to synod or to the General Assembly. Synods also may send overtures to the Assembly. Sessions may send overtures to presbytery about matters of interest to the wider church.

In matters of discipline, more-inclusive councils have jurisdiction over cases of judicial process brought to them from less-inclusive ones. These judicial responsibilities of councils are discussed in chapter 13 of this book.

A further consequence of the church's unity is that many actions of councils are done on behalf of the denomination as a whole. When a presbytery examines a candidate for ordination, it is doing so for the whole church. When a session accepts a person into the membership of the congregation, it is acting for the church at large. Ruling elders are ordained, not just for their particular congregation, but for the denomination. It is this intimate relationship that makes effective means of review and control necessary.<sup>3</sup>

### **The Powers and Responsibilities of Councils**

The *Book of Order* says several important things about the power of councils. First, any power that the church exercises rightfully comes from Jesus Christ. Christ alone is head of the church, and no human being or group should usurp his Lordship. The authority of councils is "only ministerial and declarative" [F-3.0107]. This means that the pronouncements and rules of councils should be based on the will of God revealed in Scripture. The councils do not have power to require things that the Scripture does not require. As the Westminster Confession of Faith says:

God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men [sic] which are in anything contrary to his Word, or beside it in matters of faith or worship. (XXII, 2)

Second, the power of the church is strictly that of moral and spiritual influence [F-3.0108]. It is the power of loving concern, not of punishment.

There was a time when a person could be locked in the village stocks for religious offenses, but our polity clearly says that no civil penalties can be sought for religious wrongdoing.

Third, the particular powers of councils are only those stated in the Constitution. The session has no mandate to be a dictator in the congregation. It can exercise only the authority that has been given to it in the *Book of Order*. For example, sessions have the power to “determine occasions, days, times, and places for worship” [W-2.0303], but they do not have the power to tell the minister what Scripture passages he or she shall read in the service. Presbyteries have the power to examine ministers for admission into the presbytery, but they do not have the power to refuse them admission purely on the basis of their race, gender, or sexual orientation. Each council has certain expressed powers, and only those powers, to exercise.

The principles outlined above help our churches to function in ways that are generally efficient, fair, and orderly.

The presbyterian system was formed out of a deep respect for the ability of church members to participate in their own government. It gives ultimate allegiance only to Jesus Christ. Its structures and polity are designed to further the mission of the church, to promote discipleship, and to build up the body of Christ.

### Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What faith tradition did you grow up in? What do you remember about its church government?
2. How would you explain how the PC(USA) governs itself to a Baptist friend? An Episcopal friend?
3. How is Presbyterian polity similar to the U.S. system of government?
4. If someone asked you to explain the ways Presbyterian polity is founded on Scripture, how would you reply?