

Faith, Hope, Love, and Witness: The PC(USA) Form of Government

Introduction to <i>Being Reformed: Faith Seeking Understanding</i>	3
To the Leader	4
Session 1. Core Theological Affirmations	5
Session 2. The Foundations of Presbyterian Polity	9
Session 3. The Form of Government: The Congregation and Its Members.....	13
Session 4. The Form of Government: Ordered Ministry.....	17
Session 5. The Form of Government: The Councils of the Church	21
Session 6. The Form of Government: The Church and Its Relationships.....	26

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Meet the Writer

Boyd Lien, an ordained minister of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), recently retired from Reid Memorial Presbyterian Church in Augusta, Georgia. Boyd has served as pastor and educator with congregations in Verona, New Jersey; New Castle, Pennsylvania; Eugene, Oregon; Houston, Texas; Richmond, Virginia; and Augusta, Georgia. As a church educator, he has pursued his passion to share the good news by creating and publishing a wide variety of educational resources through Abingdon Press, the Logos Program, and the Kerygma Program. As an artist, he has designed logos, illustrations, and brochures for individuals, congregations, and the denomination. Most recently, he is the author of the revised resource book and leader's guide for Kerygma's *Discovering the Bible: A New Generation*.

Introduction to *Being Reformed: Faith Seeking Understanding*

Reformed and Presbyterian Christians are people of faith who are seeking understanding. From the beginnings of our Reformed tradition, Presbyterians have realized God calls us to explore ways the Christian faith can be more fully known and expressed. This vision has driven concerns for the education of people of all ages. Presbyterians have been big on providing resources to help us delve more deeply into Christian faith and the theology that gives our living tradition its distinctive heritage.

This *Being Reformed* curriculum for adults is one expression of the desire to open up what it means to be Presbyterian Christians in the world today. Our purpose is to enhance, enrich, and expand our insights. We want Presbyterians to grow in understandings of elements that are foundational and significant for their faith. Encounters with theology, church, worship, spirituality/discipleship, and social righteousness will guide our ways.

These studies engage our whole selves. We will find our minds moved by new ideas, our emotions stirred with responses of gratitude, and calls for action that can lead us in different life directions. Heads, hearts, and hands will be drawn into the joys of discovering what new things God is calling us toward.

We invite you to join this journey of faith seeking understanding. Celebrate the blessings of our Reformed and Presbyterian tradition of faith. Be stimulated and challenged by fresh insights that will deepen your understandings. Find a stronger commitment to the God who has loved us in Jesus Christ.

To the Leader

The authors of *Being Reformed: Faith Seeking Understanding* emphasize essential Reformed theological principles that relate to our lives of faith. These sessions will help you lead a group into the theology and thoughts inspired by the challenging and interesting articles in the participant's book.

You might choose simply to begin the session with the prayer that precedes each session in the participant's book, then reading through the articles together, stopping when you or a student wishes to comment or raise a question. You could then close the session by discussing the questions at the end of the session and encouraging the group members to do the spiritual practice.

Unfortunately, that style of leading does not meet the needs of every kind of learner. The session plans encourage group leaders to try some new things to light up the hearts and minds of more people. Most teachers teach the way they like to learn. Choosing one new activity during each session will stretch you and open a door to someone who learns differently than you. Over the weeks, you will notice what your group enjoys and what they are unwilling to do. Let that, rather than your preferences, be your guide as you prepare to lead.

These session plans are designed to encourage group participation. Discussion and sharing create community and provide practice that all of us need in expressing our faith and wrestling with our questions. When asking questions, get comfortable with some silence while group members contemplate a response. Resist the urge to fill up the silence with your words.

If your group members like to talk, you might not be able to ask every suggested question. Also it will make a difference in your group session if group members have read the articles prior to the session. If you find it necessary to read from the participant's book during the group session, choose the passages that convey the core ideas.

You are more than a dispenser of information. In your role as group leader, you cooperate with God in the formation of faith and in the transformation of lives. You are the lead learner, modeling a way that faith seeks understanding. You are not trying to cover a lesson, but to uncover truth. Pray for yourself and your group members, prepare your session, relax, and enjoy!

May God bless your faithfulness!

Core Theological Affirmations

Scripture

Colossians 1:15–17; Philippians 2:5–8

Main Idea

Vital connections exist between what we believe about God (theology), the Church (ecclesiology), and the way we govern our common life together as a church (polity). Thus, using theological language about the triune God and the calling of the Church, the *Book of Order* begins by articulating the Foundations of Presbyterian Polity.

Teaching Points

This session invites participants to:

1. Compare and contrast a portion of the 2011–2013 *Book of Order* with the 2009–2011 *Book of Order*.
2. Explore three seminal ideas that guide the thinking behind our polity.
3. Express their hope for a “new openness” within the Church to fulfill God’s mission in the world.

Resources Needed

Bibles

Participant’s books

Christ-candle and lighter

Cross

Copies of the 2011–2013 *Book of Order*

Newsprint and markers

Hymnals with the hymn “How Firm a Foundation” or
“The Church’s One Foundation”

Leader Prep

Prepare for leading each session by reading the participant's book, underlining its major points, highlighting questions to pursue, and noting significant insights. Read the suggested sections of the 2011–2013 *Book of Order*, specifically the passages discussed in each session.

Before the session, place a Christ-candle (usually a white pillar candle) in the center of your teaching space. Each session in this study begins by lighting the candle, reading Scripture, and uniting in Dr. Hooker's prayer. Enlist members of the group to share in the reading and also in lighting the Christ-candle. For this session, place a cross on the table next to the Christ-candle.

In introducing the course you may wish to refer to Dr. McKim's introduction to this study on page 4 of the participant's book. He states that in light of the newly adopted Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Form of Government, this study is "to acquaint Presbyterians with the basics of the new [*Book of Order*] and the theological and ecclesiastical insights it presents." You can learn more about the new *Book of Order*, how it was developed, and how it was adopted using these links:

pcusa.org/news/2011/6/7/churchwide-letter-concerning-new-form-government pcusa.org/resource/frequently-asked-questions-new-form-government

pcusa.org/resource/comparison-chart-former-form-government-new-founda

pcusa.org/resource/comparison-chart-new-foundations-and-form-governme

For this study, you will need copies of the 2011–2013 *Book of Order*. A print edition of the 2011–2013 *Book of Order* is available at store.pcusa.org/OGA11001 and a downloadable edition at store.pcusa.org/OGA11010. For the purposes of this study, you can visit pcusa.org/fog at no cost for the Foundations of Presbyterian Polity and Form of Government excerpts referred to in this study.

For Hands, the participants will write words and draw symbols on sheets of newsprint. To enhance the theological theme of this session, consider posting a sheet of newsprint with some traditional symbols for the Trinity, God, Christ, Holy Spirit, church, and so on.

For Depart, you will need to form four groups of readers. This can be done by counting off by four around the group. Or it may involve other groupings such as elders, deacons, church school teachers, choir members, committee members, and so on. Also for Depart, consider inviting an accompanist to lead the singing of a hymn.

Leading the Session

Gather

- Light the Christ-candle with the words of Paul from Colossians 1:15–17.
- Introduce the scope of this study by explaining its purpose and listing the flow of the topics in the sessions. Depending on your context, explain background about how the changes in the *Book of Order* came to be.
- Pray together the prayer in the participant’s book.

Head

- Dr. Hooker writes: “Three ideas Christians have long held dear guide the thinking behind our polity. The first is the doctrine of the Trinity, the ancient notion that the God we meet in Jesus Christ is eternally one God in three Persons: Father, Son, and Spirit.”
- Have participants read F-1.01 (God’s Mission) and underline the actions of the triune God (first paragraph) and the actions of the Church (second paragraph). Ask: *What has God done? What is God now doing? What actions guide God’s mission?*
- Read the beginning section of the 2009–2011 *Book of Order* (G-1.0100, The Head of the Church), which is found on page 11 of the participant’s book.
- Compare and contrast the starting place of the 2011–2013 *Book of Order* with the 2009–2011 *Book of Order*. Ask: *What impact is made by starting with God’s mission? What do you hear in these words?*

Heart

- Have the participants articulate the similarities and differences between the Western tradition and the Eastern tradition as outlined in the section “The Triune God—Two Emphases.” Ask: *With which tradition do you most closely resonate?*
- Read Philippians 2:5–8.
- Dr. Hooker writes: “God is not aloof and removed from creation, but deeply engaged with it, transforming creation so that it reflects God’s will and intent.”
- Ask: *What does it say about God that we experience God as suffering in Jesus Christ? What does it say about the Church if we understand God as communal and relational in nature?*

- Engagement is an important theme for Dr. Hooker. Ask: *In what ways is engagement a helpful and creative way to understand our polity?*

Hands

- Read F-1.0201 (The Authority of Christ). Call the participants' attention to the cross and Christ-candle. Ask: *In what ways is your congregation a joyful participant in Christ's ongoing life and work?*
- Dr. Hooker writes: "God's engagement with the world creates the Church, a community of believers who are called to bear witness to God's ongoing transformation of the world and to participate in this transformation as God gives opportunity."
- Form groups of two or three. Have each group read F-1.0401 (Continuity and Change), and discuss: *In what ways does your community of faith live out the statements in this section?*
- Have each group read F-1.0404 (Openness). On sheets of newsprint, have each group write words or draw symbols that represent aspects of a new openness in the Church. When all are finished, have groups post and explain their words and symbols.
- Ask: *What particular hope do you bear for your congregation?*

Depart

- Invite participants to choose one of the displayed expressions from Hands and commit to praying and working for that aspect of openness in the Church in the coming week.
- Refer to F-1.02 (Jesus Christ Is Head of the Church). Read this section as a confession of faith by forming four groups of readers:
 - Group 1: F-1.0201, *The Authority of Christ*
 - Group 2: F-1.0202, *Christ Calls and Equips the Church*
 - Group 3: F-1.0203, *Christ Gives the Church Its Life*
 - Group 4: F-1.0204, *Christ Is the Church's Hope*
 - All: F-1.0205, *Christ Is the Foundation of the Church*
- Sing or read together one of the following hymns: "How Firm a Foundation" or "The Church's One Foundation."
- Pray a closing prayer and extinguish the Christ-candle.

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Session 1. Core Theological Affirmations	5
Session 2. The Foundations of Presbyterian Polity.....	12
Session 3. The Form of Government: The Congregation and Its Members	19
Session 4. The Form of Government: Ordered Ministry	26
Session 5. The Form of Government: The Councils of the Church.....	33
Session 6. The Form of Government: The Church and Its Relationships.....	40
Suggestions for Further Study.....	48

Core Theological Affirmations

Scripture

John 17:20–24 This portion of Jesus’ “high priestly prayer” lifts up the essential oneness of God, and asks that it be reflected in the unity of the Church.

Prayer

Holy God, whom Jesus called *Father*, your coming into the world in Christ is transforming your creation. Thank you for his living, his dying, and his rising again. Thank you for calling into being a community of witnesses, the Church. Grant that we may be faithful to your call, bearing eloquent testimony to your grace, becoming ever more one in love for you and for each other. In Christ. Amen.

Introduction

Before we begin our study of the text of the new Foundations of Presbyterian Polity and Form of Government, let’s spend a few moments revisiting some ancient theological ideas on which both the foundations and form rest.

Why talk about theology in a study of polity? Simply put, what we think about the Church—our *ecclesiology*—is directly connected to the way we live out our common life as a church—our *polity*. (Throughout this study, we will use the capitalized word *Church* to refer to the Church of Jesus Christ and the lowercase term *church* to mean a denomination. A particular gathering of believers in a specific location is a *congregation*.) One of the primary goals of the new documents was to make the connection between ecclesiology and polity clearer and more explicit. That is why there is a new document, the Foundations of Presbyterian Polity, in our *Book of Order*, which begins with some explicitly theological language about God, Christ, and the calling of the church.

In particular, three ideas Christians have long held dear guide the thinking behind our polity. The first is the doctrine of the Trinity, the ancient notion that the God we meet in Jesus Christ is eternally one

God in three Persons: Father, Son, and Spirit. The second is that God is not aloof and removed from creation, but deeply engaged with it, transforming creation so that it reflects God's will and intent. The third is that God's engagement with the world creates the Church, a community of believers who are called to bear witness to God's ongoing transformation of the world and to participate in this transformation as God gives opportunity. Each of these seminal ideas bears more exploration.

The Triune God—Two Emphases

Sometimes when a preacher talks about the Trinity, eyes glaze over and attention drifts; some are convinced that the doctrine is esoteric and irrelevant to the life of faith. In fact, nothing could be farther from the truth. If it is true God in Christ calls the Church into being through the work of the Holy Spirit (itself a Trinitarian claim!), then the character of the Church must reflect and participate in the character of the God who creates it. And that God is the triune God—so says our historic faith.

If it is true God in Christ calls the Church into being through the work of the Holy Spirit (itself a Trinitarian claim!), then the character of the Church must reflect and participate in the character of the God who creates it.

That historic faith has many ways of describing the inner relationships of the Father, Son, and Spirit, and some are more helpful than others. At the risk of oversimplifying an extraordinarily complex doctrine, it might be possible to reduce our models of the Trinity to two main emphases. Broadly speaking, one is characteristic of Western Christian approaches—Roman Catholic and Protestant—and the other is more frequently found in Eastern and Orthodox communities.

Western tradition understands the nature of God by looking first and principally at Jesus Christ. It looks to the teachings and actions of Jesus, but especially to the death and resurrection of Jesus as revelatory of the character of God. The God we meet in Jesus is the “Crucified God,” as theologian Jürgen Moltmann expresses in the title of his famous work. The wisdom of God the Father is revealed in the foolishness of God the Son, who dies for our sins rather than bringing the death and destruction we deserve. The strength of God the Father to defeat sin and evil is realized in the apparent weakness

of God the Son in the face of that very sin and evil (1 Corinthians 1:18–25). This crucified God is eternally engaged in transforming the world through the ongoing presence of God’s Spirit, working to transform individual lives, whole societies, and even to renew creation itself.

Eastern tradition would not deny any of the foregoing, but it also holds out another emphasis—that of God as relational or communal. In this view, the three Persons of the Trinity—God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit—are bound to one another in eternal, intimate, interpenetrating relationship. They are three, but their unity is such that the work of one is the work of all and the presence of one is the presence of all. To speak of one is to speak of all. Sometimes called the *perichoretic* (meaning “inter-penetrating”) model, this view emphasizes that the oneness of God is expressed in the community of the three Persons of the Trinity. That community is a community of such love that it is constantly open and seeking to draw the world into its eternal fellowship and embrace.

It’s important to note these are not competitive emphases; that is, one is not right and the other wrong. In fact, they are equally essential if we are to understand both God and the Church God calls into being. A view of the Church growing out of the Western model apprehends that the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ are central to the life, message, and mission of the Church. We are called out of and then sent into the world—the very world “God so loved” that God “gave his only Son” (John 3:16)—to love the world as God loved it, even if that love means laying down our lives in love’s service.

A view of the Church informed by the Eastern model apprehends that the Church is a community of such love and connection that nothing truly tears it apart. Perhaps even more important, like the divine community it reflects, the Church’s community is constantly open, seeking to welcome and include in its fellowship all those God loves. It is therefore radically hospitable, ever willing to extend itself so that the fellowship may be larger and more complete.

Rather than being incompatible, these two emphases complement each other, and together give us a fuller picture of both the God we worship and the Church we are called to be.

The God Engaged with Creation

One of the ideas that distinguishes Christianity from many religions both ancient and modern is its conviction that God does not remain

aloof from the world God has created, but rather is constantly and eternally engaged with it. In the classical language of theology, God

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is not only “transcendent” but also “immanent.” The nature of this immanence is expressed in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, who “did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness” (Philippians 2:6–7).

Several things here are important. First, God comes to us; we do not have to engage in some spiritual quest to find God. We are saved by God’s

grace, and not by our own moral or spiritual accomplishments. But God’s transformational engagement with the world also means salvation itself is transformed. God brings salvation to us; we are not plucked up and taken to some other place. Being saved is not being whisked off to another more blessed realm; it is being transformed as part of the transformation of *this realm*, the world God loves so much. To follow Jesus is to live out God’s intent for creation, to live in the present according to the promised future God holds in store for all life.

Second, God’s engagement is not merely a one-time event, but an eternal and ongoing one. To be sure, God enters human history in the historical life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. But the end of the Gospels is not the end of the story. Jesus’ resurrection from the dead means he is not confined to the limitations of human history, where all things die, but rather is eternally present in the world, continuing the work of transformation and redemption. Jesus Christ is not a historical memory, preserved in the pages of the New Testament; he is the living Lord of all times and places: past, present, and future.

Third, the engagement of God with the world brings us into community and fellowship with God. Theologian William Placher said it beautifully: “In the Incarnation, the three show that there is always within God a space large enough for the whole world, and even all its sin: the Word’s greatest distance from the one he calls Father is so great that no one falls outside it, and the Spirit fills all that space with love.”¹

1. William C. Placher, *The Triune God* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 155.

The Church—A Community of Witness

We have suggested that the triune God is engaged with the world, loving it so much as to die for it in Christ, and being so open to it as to transform and include it in the divine fellowship at the very heart of God. If these things are true, what do they tell us about the Church?

First, they tell us the Church is the product of God's redemptive, transformational engagement with the world. When the triune God transforms individuals, societies, and creation, communities are formed composed of people whose lives have been changed. Such people find themselves drawn together, not by their agreement on points of doctrine, but by their experience of "amazing grace." They find they have a new purpose in their common life: to bear witness that transformation is possible in the world, precisely because they themselves have been transformed. The calling of the Church is to be a community that witnesses to the ongoing presence of God and participates in God's work of transformation through acts of service and love.

Second, they tell us that there is no hierarchy of grace within the communal fellowship of the Church. If there is a truly communal, loving, interpenetrating relationship of Father, Son, and Spirit that characterizes the very being of God, then it is a relationship of radical equality. That same relationship of equality must characterize God's relationship with the Church. God is not more loving and gracious to some Christians than others, and God's Spirit does not bestow more or better gifts on some than on others. Protestant Christians have recognized this principle for centuries, under the title "the priesthood of all believers." What we mean by this phrase is that our relationship to God is direct, the result of God's transforming grace in each of our lives. We do not require the intervention of a priest who connects us to God. We are, rather, priests for one another, lifting each other in prayer and serving alongside each other in ministry.

Finally, because there is no hierarchy of grace, there is also no hierarchy of ministry. Each of us is called to a ministry in our baptism. This baptismal calling makes each

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believer a witness to God's grace and a servant of God's kingdom. In baptism, God's Spirit bestows on each of us the gifts we need to serve this calling and perform this ministry. Our gifts in the Spirit are different, but some are not more important or valuable than others. The Church may recognize gifts and ministries in some of us that it needs to set aside (or "order") for the use and upbuilding of God's people as a whole, but it does not set those above the ministry of all of us.

Spiritual Practice

Read the questions for ordination in W-4.4003 of the *Book of Order*. Jot down on a piece of paper any connections you see between what you have read in this session and what deacons, ruling elders, teaching elders commit themselves to in these questions. Share them with another participant in this study and compare your respective insights.

Questions for Reflection

Theologians often say that our experience of God reflects something essential about the being of God. What does it say about God that we experience God as suffering in Jesus Christ? What does it say about the Church if we understand God as communal and relational in nature?

The second section of this session ("The God Engaged with Creation") argues that God's coming to the world transforms what it means to be saved, so that we are not whisked away to a better place, but transformed as part of God's transformation of *this* place? Do you agree? What does such a notion of salvation say about the work of the Church?

The third section of this session ("The Church—A Community of Witness") states that "because there is no hierarchy of grace, there is also no hierarchy of ministry." What implications do this statement and the idea of a baptismal calling have for our common practice of dividing the church into lay and clergy categories?

From the 2009–2011 *Book of Order*:

G-1.0100

The Head of the Church

- a. All power in heaven and earth is given to Jesus Christ by Almighty God, who raised Christ from the dead and set him above all rule and authority, all power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come. God has put all things under the Lordship of Jesus Christ and has made Christ Head of the Church, which is his body.
- b. Christ calls the Church into being, giving it all that is necessary for its mission to the world, for its building up, and for its service to God. Christ is present with the Church in both Spirit and Word. It belongs to Christ alone to rule, to teach, to call, and to use the Church as he wills, exercising his authority by the ministry of women and men for the establishment and extension of his Kingdom.
- c. Christ gives to his Church its faith and life, its unity and mission, its officers and ordinances. Insofar as Christ's will for the Church is set forth in Scripture, it is to be obeyed. In the worship and service of God and the government of the church, matters are to be ordered according to the Word by reason and sound judgment, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.
- d. In affirming with the earliest Christians that Jesus is Lord, the Church confesses that he is its hope and that the Church, as Christ's body, is bound to his authority and thus free to live in the lively, joyous reality of the grace of God.