

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

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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.

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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.