



PRINCIPLES OF PRESBYTERIAN POLITY

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FOREWORD

The *Book of Order* states that “[t]he Church is the body of Christ. Christ gives to the Church all the gifts necessary to be his body. The church strives to demonstrate these gifts in its life as a community in the world” (F-1.0301).

The key concepts are gifts to be the church and the demonstration of the gifts as a community. The *Book of Order* is how the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has organized itself to demonstrate its gifts as a community. It is just a book with words. But those words shape us and push us until, as the proverbial teacher says, we have lived up to our potential.

After an effort of almost ten years the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) approved a revised Form of Government in 2011. This revision was the result of thousands of conversations, historical and social research, and brave vision casting. The vision was to have a Form of Government (FoG) that allows for the multiple contexts of congregations and presbyteries: contexts as varied as the Presbyterians-packed Pennsylvania and the sparsely populated Wyoming, contexts as varied as New York City and Salina, Kansas. Very different contexts exist in a presbytery with 35,000 members and a presbytery with 3,500 members. The former Form of Government created a structure that required uniformity. As the country and the church changed, that uniformity did not serve the mission of the church.

A multiyear committee project led by the late former moderator Cynthia Bolbach brought forth a revision that met this challenge. It separated the foundational material of what we are as Presbyterians from the governance material. There is now a Foundations of Polity section in the constitution. This section spells out a clear articulation of who we are as Reformed people and how we are shaped as a church. It combines historical material with ecclesiastical prose.

One of the most noted differences in the revised Form of Government is that it starts with the mission of the congregation. In G-1.01 it states in part: “The triune God gives to the congregation all the gifts of the gospel necessary to be the Church. The congregation is the basic form of the church, but it is not of itself a sufficient form of the church.” These two sentences both spell out the need for a contextual witness where each congregation lives out its mission to its community. A congregation with many gifts to meet the many needs of its community. But it also says that we are a larger church who shares gifts and strengths among its congregations. What is

the impact of what seem contradictory statements? The impact is that we are church together. The gospel may be shared to twenty in worship or to two thousand. A congregation may have a once-a-week food pantry or a community nutrition program. It is all a common and yet unique effort. These efforts become sufficient to the mission of Christ's church because we share the gifts of Christ together.

The revision of the Form of Government in 2011 leads the church into a new century with a vision of the whole and the particulars, in that we keep our Reformed mindfulness to equip individuals to be thinkers and doers of mission and honor the collective wisdom of councils. It is the Reformed way.

Gradye Parsons
Stated Clerk of the General Assembly
of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

AUTHOR'S NOTE

It is inevitable that any book like this one—a guide to another book that is subject to ongoing revision—will eventually become outdated. Two major changes to the *Book of Order* have made an update necessary.

First, effective with the 2017–2019 edition of the *Book of Order*, the name of an essential order of ministry changed. Beginning with the major revision of the Form of Government in 2011, those serving congregations as pastors, or in various specialized ministries, were officially known as teaching elders. The historic title of minister of the Word and Sacrament became at that time an alternate title. Beginning with the 2017–2019 edition, minister of the Word and Sacrament was restored as the preferred title. Teaching elder became the alternate. This required dozens of small revisions throughout the *Book of Order*, and therefore in *Principles of Presbyterian Polity* as well.

Second, that same 2017–2019 edition of the *Book of Order* included a completely revised Directory for Worship. Not only were there numerous changes to the text, but the entire paragraph-numbering system was revamped.

This updated edition of *Principles of Presbyterian Polity*—based on the 2019–2021 *Book of Order*—reflects both these major changes.

Further change may be on the horizon, because in 2022 a new edition of the Rules of Discipline is scheduled to be presented to the General Assembly. If the Assembly adopts the proposed new text and a majority of presbyteries concur, the new Rules of Discipline will take effect sometime in 2023.

That change—if it comes to pass—will likely require further revisions to *Principles of Presbyterian Polity*, but for now this guide is as up to date as it can be. It is my hope and prayer that this second edition may be even more useful to the church than the first one.

Carlos E. Wilton
2021

INTRODUCTION

A Matter of Principle

It was past 10:00 p.m., and still the fierce discussion around the session table dragged on. Irene's fellow ruling elders had been at it for nearly an hour, and she was despairing that agreement would ever emerge.

Two factions were on a collision course: those who were backing a capital campaign to renovate the sanctuary and those who were not. One group, eager to create an open chancel appropriate to the church's growing informal worship service, favored the campaign. The other side, deeply attached not only to traditional worship but also to the beloved space where so many family members had been baptized, married, and commended to life eternal, thought it a bad idea.

Irene had friends on both sides. She knew how dug-in each faction was, how reluctant they were to concede even an inch of ground. In their own way, each side believed the future of their congregation hung on this decision.

In her distress—without even waiting for Harry, her pastor and session moderator, to recognize her—Irene blurted out: “Can’t we all just get along?”

There was a moment of stunned silence. Then Frank, the author of the renovation proposal, sneered: “You can’t be serious: *that* old line?”

Victoria, Frank's staunchest opponent, surprisingly agreed: “The time for getting along has passed. One side's got to win this thing, once and for all!”

Irene retreated into silence. She felt sorry she had even opened her mouth.

But then Pastor Harry spoke up. “Irene's got a point. Although she may not realize it, she's echoing one of the deepest principles on which our Presbyterian government is based. Let me read you a few lines from the *Book of Order*: “We also believe that there are truth and forms with respect to which men of good characters and principles may differ. And in all these we think it the duty both of private Christians and societies to exercise mutual forbearance toward each other” (*Book of Order*, F3.0105).

“Those lines were written,” Harry continued, “not long after the Revolutionary War. Only men exercised church leadership back then. Those men-only days are thankfully long behind us, but the church has kept that historic language just as it was written. That's because the principle of

mutual forbearance—the art of deeply listening to one another in times of disagreement, and finding ways to get along—is so central to who we are as Christians. This is what the *Book of Order* calls a preliminary principle: one of the things we Presbyterians say we believe, on which all other rules are based.”

The pastor’s words changed the tenor of the debate. Both sides still argued their strong views, but they took Harry’s reminder to heart. The session now realized that, as a council of Christ’s church, their meeting had to proceed differently than that of the local town council or neighborhood association. One opinion would prevail in the end. There was only one sanctuary, after all, and either it would be renovated or it would not. Yet the session members now realized they could make that decision in a way that honored the deeply held convictions of all parties.

It had become, for them, a matter of principle.

To the Reader

You may be a newly elected ruling elder in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). You may be an experienced ruling elder, following a presbytery-required course of study before being commissioned to particular service as a supply preacher. You may be a seminarian preparing for ordination as a minister. You may be a ruling elder recently elected by your session as a commissioner to presbytery or a minister or ruling elder elected by your presbytery as a commissioner to synod or General Assembly. Or you may be an experienced ruling elder or minister seeking to brush up on your polity knowledge. If you fit any of these categories—or if you are simply curious to know more about how decisions are made in the Presbyterian tradition—this book is for you.

All readers should note that, as of the time of this writing, the General Assembly is about to consider a proposal for a new Directory for Worship that would entirely replace the present one, thereby rendering this book’s Directory for Worship paragraph citations (those beginning with the letter “W”) obsolete. Should that proposal be approved by the General Assembly and a majority of the presbyteries, the new numbering system would take effect in June 2018.

Why a Book of Order?

A Manual for Mission. Most people, opening the *Book of Order* for the first time, feel a little intimidated. With its unfamiliar terms and oddly numbered paragraphs, the book resembles a law book. “That’s not what I signed up for!” may be the initial response.

At the heart of the Presbyterian faith is a Lord of love, not laws. The carpenter of Nazareth calls disciples to fish for people, not to follow

procedures. The first inclination may be to dismiss church governance—this thing Presbyterians call “polity”—as a necessary evil at best and a “dismal science” at worst.

That would be a huge mistake. The *Book of Order*—the product of the collective wisdom of generations of church leaders—has been written not to impede Christian mission, but to advance it. Properly used, the *Book of Order* is a manual for Christian mission. Paul’s letters reveal how very common it is for a Christian community struggling to discern God’s will to become mired in conflict. We all know that, when Christians fight with one another, Christ’s mission is the loser.

The first chapter of the *Book of Order* affirms that “Christ alone rules, calls, teaches, and uses the Church as he wills” (F-1.0202). Yet who speaks for Christ? There’s the rub. Without ordered decision-making processes that broadly spread the work of discernment among church leaders, the loudest, most narcissistic voices will likely prevail, to the detriment of the gospel.

Reformation Roots. Among other things, the Protestant Reformation was a rebellion against centralized, monarchical authority in the church. Searching the Scriptures and the writings of ancient theologians, John Calvin—the Reformation’s brightest intellectual light—discerned an older tradition of governance. This tradition was built on the decisions of councils: assemblies of elected church leaders. It was Calvin’s deep conviction that communities are better equipped than individuals to discern the leading of the Holy Spirit.

As Calvin’s Presbyterianism made its way to the New World—an arduous ocean voyage away from the established national churches of Europe—his theological heirs came to realize they needed new ways of being the church. They reinvented Presbyterian government for the New-World context.

In the absence of princes powerful enough to impose church government from above, they rebuilt their quintessentially American church order from below. Their innovation was in tune with the needs of Colonial America: Presbyterian governance would help inspire the uprising that became the American Revolution. Some described the Revolution, on the floor of Parliament, as “that Presbyterian rebellion.”

First Principles. The first principles of this American adaptation of Presbyterianism are displayed in the Foundations section of the *Book of Order*, specifically the third chapter (F-3.01). Two important chapters precede this one: a chapter grounding the mission of the church in the authority of Jesus Christ, its head (F-1.0), and a chapter relating church government to the first volume of the *Constitution*, the *Book of Confessions* (F-2.0).

Having grounded its authority in Christ and the Confessions, the *Book of Order* goes on to present two sets of foundational principles: the 1788 Historic Principles of Church Order (F-3.01) and the 1797 Principles of Presbyterian Government (F-3.02). These two lists are different from one another in purpose. The first is more theological in nature, the second more practical.

Note the difference in the names of the two lists. The first has to do with order; the second, with government. The first addresses the *why* of church order; the second, the *how*. Order is a divine gift. Government is a human construction. Order is the manner of life God intends for humanity. Government is humanity's practical method of carrying out that mandate.

The Principles of Presbyterian Government (F-3.02), although modeled on the eighteenth-century original, were extensively rewritten as part of the revision process that led to the present Form of Government.

As an analogy, consider the world of music. On the one hand, there is music theory, the study of first principles such as pitch, rhythm, and harmony; these principles are organized (in the Western musical tradition) according to the eight primary notes of the scale and are measured by conventional time signatures.

On the other hand, there is musical practice, which involves arranging the fundamental musical elements into a pleasing composition. Few composers achieve greatness without first grounding their creative vision in solid theory.

In the life of the church, proceeding directly to the *how*—while giving the *why* a mere wink and a nod—is a sure route to stifling legalism. That is why this study of the *Book of Order* takes its form from principles rather than practice, order rather than government.

There are two ways to learn Presbyterian polity. The first is through rote memorization. The second is a more inductive method, by which students first master the general principles in the Foundations section of the *Book of Order*, then track those principles as they are replicated in the chapters that follow. This book follows the second method.

Those with the patience to attend to “first things first” will find in these pages an enduring but adaptable model, centuries old, of how the Presbyterian expression of the body of Christ orders its mission and ministry.

Tracing the Hidden Structure. The *Book of Order* is a lean, elegant, and highly logical document. With the Historic Principles of Church Order (F-3.01), the Principles of Presbyterian Government (F-3.02), and the other foundational documents as the starting-point, subsequent chapters build upon those that precede them.

This is analogous to the way reinforced-concrete buildings are designed.

Such buildings are constructed of concrete blocks laid one atop another, row upon row. The new structure rises predictably, its architectural footprint replicated in the stories above.

Concrete blocks are solid, with open spaces at their inner core. As masons stack the blocks, they line up the hollow, inner spaces to form a series of silos. Then they drop long, iron bars, known as rebar, through the empty columns. Finally, they fill the remaining space with poured concrete. The result is a strong and durable structure, able to resist not only the downward tug of gravity but also the side-to-side pull of other physical forces.

Theological themes rise through the *Book of Order's* structure like rebar rods, lending stability to the higher levels. Students who comprehend the basic theological footprint are often able to predict what the later chapters will say, even before they consult them.

It is especially important to be aware of this orderly, sequential structure in this era of hypertext documents. As electronic versions of the *Book of Order* increase in popularity, more users are accessing its material using electronic search technology or by clicking on hypertext links in other documents. This is like entering a building through the upper-story windows rather than through the ground-floor entrance lobby. While swift and convenient, this approach sometimes causes readers to miss the big picture.

Presbyterian Polity DNA. The concrete-block analogy has its limitations because the Bible portrays the church not as a static structure but as a living organism, the body of Christ. A biological analogy may serve us better.

One of the greatest advances in the history of biological science occurred in 2003, when a team of researchers published an essentially complete sequencing of the human genome. The Human Genome Project, a fifteen-year joint effort of the United States Department of Energy and the National Institutes of Health, gathered the findings of a multitude of scientists from around the world into a complex map of the forty-six chromosomes of the human body and its more than 20,000 genes. This biological map is guiding the work of countless medical researchers.

The organizational structure of the Presbyterian portion of the Christ's body is likewise built around a genome of sorts. Like the double-helix chromosome of human DNA, it is comprised of two intertwined and complementary patterns: the Historic Principles of Church Order and the Principles of Presbyterian Government. Learn those principles, and the practice follows naturally.

An Inductive Approach

In writing this book, I am deeply indebted to a fellow student of polity and a mentor of mine, William E. Chapman, who was my predecessor in teaching Presbyterian polity courses at New Brunswick and Princeton

Theological Seminaries. His book *History and Theology in the Book of Order: Blood on Every Page* (Witherspoon Press, 1999) has guided earlier generations of polity students in understanding the Form of Government inductive fashion: first things first, beginning with general principles, then moving on to specific details.

In part 1, we will set the *Book of Order* in the context of other sources of authority in the church and will go on to highlight some of the ways the *Book of Order's* language and organization set it apart from other books. After those preliminaries, we will move on, in the second and third chapters of part 1, to examine the first two chapters of the Foundations section, which acknowledge Christ, Scripture, and the Confessions, in that order, as higher sources of authority in the church. We will round out part 1 by setting the Historic Principles in their historical context.

In part 2, we will consider each of the Historic Principles of Church Order in turn, making connections between them and specific practices—primarily from the Form of Government and the Rules of Discipline. In the final chapter of part 2, we will briefly examine the Principles of Presbyterian Government.

PART I
Preliminaries

BECOMING FAMILIAR WITH THE BOOK

In order to become familiar with the *Book of Order*, it helps to understand the nature of its authority in the church and also to pick up some basic navigation tips and terminology. It is also useful to know what major changes came along in 2011 with the adoption of the present Form of Government.

You Can Tell This Book by Its Cover

The first thing to notice, upon picking up the *Book of Order*, is the cover. Along with the title there is a subtitle: *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Part II*. Part I is an entirely separate volume, the *Book of Confessions*.

How are the two volumes related to each other? Section F-2.02 aligns the Scriptures, the Confessions, and the *Book of Order* in order of priority: “These confessional statements are subordinate standards in the church, subject to the authority of Jesus Christ, the Word of God, as the Scriptures bear witness to him.”

No sentence in the *Book of Order* is more important than this one. It displays a clear hierarchy of authority. First, there is Jesus Christ the cornerstone, the living head of the church. Second comes the most foundational of the church’s documents, the Scriptures. Third comes Part I of the *Constitution*, the *Book of Confessions*—a digest of the theology expressed in the Scriptures as interpreted in the Reformed tradition. Finally, there is Part II of the *Constitution*, the *Book of Order*, which specifically applies Scripture and Confessions to guide the life of the church.

The *Book of Order*’s cover also displays a range of two years, reflecting the General Assembly’s biennial meeting schedule. New editions of the book are necessary because each General Assembly recommends to the presbyteries that the *Book of Order* be amended in a variety of ways. Once those amendments have

It is worth noting that the *Constitution*’s prominent mention of Jesus Christ as the living head of the church discourages any excessively literalist interpretation of the Scriptures. Literalist interpretations, while paying lip service to the lordship of Christ, tend in practice to lift the authority of the written Word of God over that of Christ the living Word.

been ratified by a majority of the presbyteries, they are included in the next edition of the book, marked in boldface type. A new edition is prepared as soon as a majority of the presbyteries have spoken on all the amendments recommended by the previous Assembly.

Naming and Numbering

Opening the book's cover and moving on to its Preface, we discover a brief description of the contents of Part I and Part II of the *Constitution*. The Preface lists each of the confessions included in the *Book of Confessions* and then explains that the *Book of Order* is divided into four sections:

- Foundations of Presbyterian Polity (F)
- Form of Government (G)
- Directory for Worship (W)
- Rules of Discipline (D)

The letters F, G, W, and D are prefixes that precede each numbered paragraph of the *Book of Order*. Readers who come upon a citation from the book can instantly find the section from which it comes.

The *Book of Order* contains page numbers for convenience, but serious students of polity consider the page numbers to be a secondary feature. The paragraph numbers are of greater importance, because they do not generally change as the book is amended. Also, the historic rulings of permanent judicial commissions gathered in the *Annotated Book of Order* specifically cite paragraph numbers.

The *Annotated Book of Order*, available from the Office of the General Assembly in both print and electronic versions, provides the full text of the book, interspersed with citations referring to judicial rulings and actions of the General Assembly.

On occasion, an amendment may remove an entire paragraph. In such a case, the other paragraphs are not renumbered. Typically, the old number is retained with no text beside it, other than a historical notation that begins: "[This section was stricken by . . .]." This is necessary because older citations in judicial decisions may direct readers to a paragraph that is no longer part of the book.

A final caution: paragraph numbers utilize decimal points after each principal section number, with further numbers added off to the right, as needed. Unlike decimalized numbers in mathematics, zeroes have value in this system. Thus, 1.0 precedes 1.9, but 1.10 follows 1.9 (in mathematics, the sequence would be 1.0, 1.10, 1.9).

Precision in Language

Next comes a brief glossary of commonly used words. Wherever these words appear within the book, they have a legally precise meaning. Readers are well advised to become thoroughly familiar with the specific definitions attached to each of these words, because they are applied consistently throughout the book:

- “Shall” and “is to be/are to be” signify practice that is mandated.
- “Should” signifies practice that is strongly recommended.
- “Is appropriate” signifies practice that is commended as suitable.
- “May” signifies practice that is permissible but not required.
- “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.

In particular, it is important to fully internalize the difference in meaning between the frequently occurring words “shall” and “should” or “may.” The difference here is between mandatory and optional. The bottom line is this: “shall” allows absolutely no wiggle room, while either “should” or “may” opens a loophole that allows situational discretion.

Important Changes in Terminology

In 2011, a completely new, simplified Form of Government replaced the former edition, which had grown in size and complexity over the years as the result of numerous amendments. With the 2011–2013 edition, the following major changes in terminology came into effect:

- “Minister” or “minister of the Word and Sacrament” became “teaching elder” (with the 2017–2019 edition, that change was reversed).
- “Elder” became “ruling elder.”
- “Governing body” became “council.”
- “Commissioned lay pastor” became “ruling elder commissioned to pastoral service.”
- “Office” or “ordained office” became “ordered ministry.”
- “Officer/s” became “[person/those in] ordered ministry.”

An explanation of the reason behind these changes is in order, since

some of the older terms continue in everyday use among those reared on earlier editions of the *Book of Order*.

Two Types of Elders

The 2011 Form of Government's most far-reaching terminological change was its substitution of "teaching elder" for "minister of the Word and Sacrament" and its corresponding substitution of "ruling elder" for "elder." The change to "teaching elder" did not last long; "minister of the Word and Sacrament" once again became the term of choice with the 2017–2019 edition, although "teaching elder" is preserved as an alternate.

Throughout the history of the three principal antecedent denominations of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)—the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., the Presbyterian Church in the U.S., and the United Presbyterian Church of North America—there have been two different systems of nomenclature for presbyters. Prior to the 1983 reunion, the elder/minister pairing was stronger in churches whose heritage lay with the former northern denomination, the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. The teaching elder/ruling elder variation was favored in many churches of the former southern denomination, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.).

The title of "deacon"—an order of ministry that is optional, according to G-1.0201—continues to be used without controversy, although in some parts of the former Presbyterian Church in the U.S., the word was historically used for those overseeing the congregation's financial affairs, rather than those exercising caring ministries of "compassion, witness and service" (G-2.0201). Both understandings of the distinctive diaconal functions grow out of Acts 6:1–7, in which seven men are set aside to "wait on tables" of the widows and orphans being fed by the church. The Greek original of that phrase can therefore be understood to refer to either face-to-face compassionate service or the management of the common purse that makes such service possible.

There are advantages and disadvantages to each. The "minister of the Word and Sacrament" title more accurately describes the tasks most commonly performed by those serving as pastors of congregations. Moreover, it reflects the two Reformed "marks" or "notes" of the church identified by Calvin: proclamation of the Word and celebration of the sacraments. The word "minister" is also the standard in most other churches of the Reformed tradition, including the Church of Scotland, and is more intelligible to ecumenical partners outside the Reformed tradition.

The disadvantage of the elder/minister pairing is that it can make the church more vulnerable to clericalism. Such language may lead some to give ministers of the Word and Sacrament priority in church governance, since both Calvinist marks of the church are included in their position's title.

The chief advantage of the ruling elder/teaching elder formula is that it gives clear expression to an important principle of Presbyterian polity: the parity of the two orders of ministry that share governance responsibilities. According to this principle, church councils above the level of the session are composed of equal numbers of both.

Another advantage of the ruling elder/teaching elder pairing is that, by removing the word "minister" from any single order, it encourages its application to all three orders on an equal basis. This gives voice to the understanding that servant ministry (*diakonia*, in the Greek) is the motivating spirit behind all forms of Christian ministry.

The chief disadvantage of the ruling elder/teaching elder pairing is that it does not accurately describe the multitude of tasks performed by ministers. It raises one function—teaching—above all others. This is especially problematic with respect to the celebration of the sacraments.

Significantly, "teaching elder" does not reflect the trend of many decades of broadening the functioning of individuals ordained to that order of ministry. A century ago, nearly everyone ordained to this function served as the sole pastor of a local congregation, preaching frequently. In larger congregations today, there are associate pastors who seldom preach or teach. Presbytery rolls also include a multitude of specialized ministers (chaplains, counselors, administrators, and the like) for whom teaching is not central to their day-to-day functioning.

As far as the order of ruling elder is concerned, the adjective "ruling" has been retained, although it does require continual explanation and interpretation, in contrast to the plain sense of the term (see F-3.0202). Most casual observers today understand "ruling" to refer to either monarchical domination or a formal legal opinion issued by a judge. Each of these suggests an individual style of governance that does not reflect the collegial Presbyterian decision-making tradition.

John Knox added a third mark of the church, the administration of ecclesiastical discipline, although this mark—being associated with councils rather than individuals—is not exclusively associated with the pastoral order of ministry. The teaching elder/ruling elder variant began not with Knox, but with the Scottish Reformation's second-generation systematizer of Presbyterian governance, Andrew Melville. It never caught on in Scotland but achieved some popularity on this side of the Atlantic.

Finally, it can be questioned whether a preference for the ruling elder/teaching elder terminology elevates governance to exaggerated importance, with respect to who Presbyterians are as a denomination. No other Christian denomination names its ordained leaders according to their role in church governance. Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Episcopal priests bear a title (priest) that points to what they do at the altar, interceding between the worshiping congregation and God. Lutheran, Methodist, and Baptist pastors bear a title (pastor) that points to their role in shepherding God's people. Congregationalists and others from the Reformed tradition retain the title of minister, elevating to prominence the servant-of-the-Word spirituality to which their leaders aspire.

"Teaching elder" (permitted as an alternate term in G-2.0501) is preferred by some in the setting of parliamentary meetings because it highlights the foundational principle of parity of ministries (F-3.0202). Outside the parliamentary setting, a great many Presbyterians continue to use the more universally recognizable titles of "minister" and "elder."

The Coming of Councils

Another linguistic development in the present Form of Government is that "governing bodies" have become "councils." This particular generic category—comprising all the various levels of governance—has proven chameleon-like over the years. Originally, Presbyterians spoke of "courts" of the church (giving particular emphasis to their role in adjudicating disciplinary cases). As disciplinary cases both decreased in number and came to be handled by commissions—rather than by councils meeting as committees of the whole—that term morphed into "judicatories." In the Form of Government crafted after the 1983 reunion, "judicatories" became "governing bodies."

The present term of choice, "councils," is a term with a rich pedigree. It reaches back to the early centuries of the church, when ecumenical councils such as those meeting at Nicaea and Constantinople rendered far-reaching decisions. In more recent times, the First and Second Vatican Councils played a similar role within the Roman Catholic tradition.

Although this change sent the committees once called "councils" scurrying to find a new name for themselves, this term succeeds in grounding Presbyterian practices of communal governance in a larger ecumenical tradition.

Ordered Ministry

The final significant change in language is from "office" or "ordained office" to "ordered ministry." The term "office" as applied to Reformed ministry has long been problematic, because the word carries connotations of individual decision-making authority. This official conception of

ordination attains its most distinctive form in certain Roman Catholic and high-church Anglican circles that understand the essence of ordination as conferring an “indelible mark” on the recipient. The indelible mark persists for life, unless ordained status is removed by a specific disciplinary procedure colloquially known as defrocking. In that way, ordination is analogous to baptism, which Christians of all traditions see as conferring an indelible spiritual mark.

It has never been entirely accurate to speak of Presbyterian ordained offices. Reformed theology of ordination is a functional understanding, not an official one. The church ordains men and women to service because there are tasks to be done, and these are best fulfilled by someone set apart by the laying on of hands, with prayer. The laying on of hands grounds the ordination in ancient practice but must never be seen as instrumentally transferring a special ordination charism.

The indelible-mark theology of ordination is most important to high-church Anglicans who reject the Roman Catholic teaching that ordained authority is conferred through continued communion with the bishop of Rome. High-church Anglicans replace this understanding with a doctrine proposing an unbroken string of ordinations extending back to the first apostles. As long as a priest has been ordained by the hands of a bishop, who was himself ordained by the hands of another bishop, in a line extending all the way back to Peter himself, the indelible mark has been duly conveyed and the office of priesthood attaches to that individual.

The Directory for Worship, for example, ordinarily limits the celebration of the Lord’s Supper to a minister of the Word and Sacrament who has been ordained for that purpose (W-2.0304). In situations of pastoral need, however—generally when a minister is unavailable—presbyteries may authorize a ruling elder who has been specially trained and set apart to fulfill that role in a particular church. Apart from certain urgent pastoral-care situations, the decision of when and where the Lord’s Supper is celebrated is never made by the individual celebrant but always by a council of the church, most frequently the session (W-3.0410). This is because, in the Reformed tradition, celebration of the sacraments is a function, not a power emanating from a particular office. In the local church, it is the session’s responsibility to authorize and prepare for baptism and the Lord’s Supper. It is the celebrant’s responsibility to execute the council’s mandate.

The Reformed tradition’s functional understanding of ordination is explicit in this section: “The basic form of ministry is the ministry of the

whole people of God, from whose midst some are called to ordered ministries, to fulfill particular functions. Members and those in ordered ministries serve together under the mandate of Christ" (G-2.0101).

Ministers of the Word and Sacrament are set apart to fulfill the function of celebrating the sacraments because that is a matter of good order, not because ordination confers upon them any spiritual power beyond that already conferred by the Holy Spirit upon all baptized Christians.

The Privileged Clergy

There is one inappropriate, completely un-Reformed term that still enjoys some currency among Presbyterians—surprisingly so, because it occurs neither in Scripture, nor in any past or present edition of the *Book of Order*. The only place this word occurs in the *Book of Confessions* is in a derogatory Reformation-era reference to the Roman Catholic Church.

The term is "clergy," and it has no place in the Presbyterian Church. The sole exception is certain ecumenical or interfaith conversations, when it can be useful as a neutral category comprising priests, pastors, ministers, rabbis, and imams. In internal Presbyterian discussions, there is no reason for the word ever to be used.

"Clergy" is derived from the Greek word *kleros* (meaning "share" or "portion"), which eventually evolved into the English word "clerk." Although it may not seem a word like "clerk" could convey any exalted privilege, that is true only from the vantage point of contemporary culture. In the pre-Reformation centuries, reading and writing were uncommon skills. Books and other documents were exceedingly rare. "Clerics" effectively monopolized access to Scripture. In smaller communities, they controlled access to legal documents and public proclamations as well. Members of the clergy functioned as gatekeepers, controlling access to all forms of written communication.

The heritage of the word "clergy," therefore, is entirely related to power and privilege. It connotes the sort of unhealthy professionalism that has nothing to do with profession of faith but everything to do with access to exclusive benefits. It is hard to conceive that such a model of ministry is what the church needs to lift up in these post-Christendom days, in a jaded culture crying out for authentic expressions of servant ministry.