

# THE FOUNDATIONS OF PRESBYTERIAN POLITY

## CHAPTER ONE CORE THEOLOGICAL COMMITMENTS

### 1.01 GOD'S ACTIVITY

The church bears witness to God's sovereign activity in the world as told in the Bible and understood by faith;

#### 1.0101 *God*

Created the heavens and the earth;  
Made human beings in God's image to live in community and obedience;  
Chose one family through whom to bless all families, and one people to be a light to all peoples;  
Liberated Israel from its bondage, and bound Israel in covenant;  
Led Israel through the wilderness, gave Israel a land, called Israel to faithfulness, and sustained Israel with mercy;  
Promised to consummate human life with a new reality of justice, righteousness, and peace.

#### 1.0102 *Jesus Christ*

Is the Word of God incarnate in human flesh, born of woman and living among us as one us, yet alone among us as God in our midst;  
Proclaimed good news to the poor, release to the captives, healing to the broken, and salvation to humankind;  
Was crucified at the hands of human evil, and in his death demonstrated the boundless love of God for the world;  
Was raised from death to life, and in his rising assured all those whom God has called of victory over sin and death;  
Demonstrated in his life, death, and resurrection the power and pattern of God's new reality that is coming into the world.

#### 1.0103 *The Holy Spirit*

Is God continually present in the world, to teach and bring to remembrance all that Jesus Christ showed the world;  
Sustains the faith of the church and the faith of all believers;  
Seals to the faithful the grace of God through the ordinary means of the proclamation of the Word, the administration of the sacraments, and the life of prayer;  
Inspires acts of justice, mercy, and faithfulness;  
Confronts the world with the claims of Christ's Lordship and calls the world to repentance and obedience.

### 1.02 JESUS CHRIST IS HEAD OF THE CHURCH

#### 1.0201 *The Authority of Christ*

God has given to Jesus Christ all authority in heaven and on earth, not only in this age but also in the age 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.

1.0202 *Christ Calls and Equips the Church*

Christ calls the church into being, giving it all that is necessary for its mission to the world, for its strength, and for its service to God. Christ is present with the Church in both Spirit and Word. Christ alone rules, teaches, calls, and uses the Church as he wills, exercising his authority by the ministry of women and men for the establishment and extension of God's new reality.

1.0203 *Christ Gives the Church Its Life*

Christ gives to the 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.

**1.03 THE IDENTITY OF THE CHURCH**

1.0301 *The Church is the Body of Christ*

The Church is the body of Christ, both in its corporate life and in the lives of its individual members.

The Church of Jesus Christ is the provisional demonstration of what God intends for all of humanity. The Church is called to be a sign in and for the world of the new reality which God has made available to people in Jesus Christ. The new reality revealed in Jesus Christ is the new humanity, a new creation, a new beginning for human life in the world:

- (1) Sin is forgiven.
- (2) Reconciliation is accomplished.
- (3) The dividing walls of hostility are torn down.

The Church is called to give shape and substance to this truth. The Church is further called to undertake this mission even at the risk of losing its life, trusting in God alone as the author and giver of life, sharing the gospel, and doing those deeds in the world that point beyond themselves to the new reality in Christ.

1.0302. *The Marks of the Church*<sup>1</sup>.

With Christians of the Church catholic, we affirm that the Church is "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic."

1.0302a. *The Unity of the Church*

The Church is one because Jesus Christ is one. The Church is a fellowship of believers which seeks to include all people and is never content to enjoy the benefits of Christian community for itself alone. There is one Church. It has "one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all." (Ephesians 4:5–6).

While divisions into different denominations do not destroy this unity, they do obscure it for both the Church and the world. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) affirms its historical continuity with the whole Church of Jesus Christ and its willingness to seek and to maintain communion with all other branches of the one, catholic Church.

1.0302b. *The Holiness of the Church*

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<sup>1</sup> The Nicene Creed, *The Book of Confession*, 1.3.

The Church is holy because Jesus Christ is holy. The Church is called out of and sent into the world so that it may serve its Lord. Its holiness inheres not in the purity of its doctrine, nor in the righteousness of its actions, nor even in the truth of its message, but solely in the fact that Jesus Christ who calls it and is its head is the blameless Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Even so, the Church, its members, and its officers, are called to lead lives worthy of the gospel we proclaim. We acknowledge the persistence of sin in our corporate and individual lives, even as we are forgiven by Christ and called again and yet again to strive for the purity, righteousness, and truth revealed to us in Jesus Christ and promised to all people in the new reality of God.

1.0302c. *The Universality of the Church*

The Church is universal because Jesus Christ is Lord of all time and place. The Church universal consists of all persons in every nation, together with their children, who profess faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and commit themselves to live in fellowship under his rule.

The particular congregation is understood as a local expression of the universal Church. A particular congregation consists of those persons in a particular place, along with their children, who profess faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and who have been gathered for the service of God as set forth in Scripture, subject to a particular form of church government. (G-4.0100)

1.0302d *The Apostolicity of the Church.*

The Church is apostolic because it is sent into the world by Jesus Christ. The Church is called to tell the good news of salvation by the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ, proclaiming in Word and Sacrament that the new age has dawned, and that God who creates life also frees those in bondage, forgives sin, reconciles brokenness, makes all things new, is still at work in the world.

The Church is called to present the claims of Jesus Christ, leading persons to repentance, acceptance of him as Savior and Lord, and new life as his disciples.

The Church is called to be Christ's faithful evangelist:

- (1) going into the world, making disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all he has commanded;
- (2) demonstrating by the love of its members for one another and by the quality of its common life the new reality in Christ; sharing in worship, fellowship, and nurture, practicing a deepened life of prayer and service under the guidance of the Holy Spirit;
- (3) participating in God's activity in the world through its life for others.

1.0303. *The Notes of the True Church.*<sup>2</sup>

With Christians of the Reformed tradition, we affirm that the church is called to these activities in its life and mission:

- (1) the true preaching of the Word of God, in which God has revealed himself to us, as the writings of the prophets and apostles declare;
- (2) the right administration of the sacraments of Christ Jesus, with which must be associated the Word and promise of God to seal and confirm them in our hearts; and
- (3) ecclesiastical discipline uprightly ministered, as God's Word prescribes, whereby vice is repressed and virtue nourished.

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<sup>2</sup> The Scots Confession, *The Book of Confession*, 3.18

1.0304. *The Great Ends of the Church*

The great ends of the church are:

- the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind;
- the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God;
- the maintenance of divine worship;
- the preservation of the truth;
- the promotion of social righteousness; and
- the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world.<sup>3</sup> (*G-1.0200*)

## CHAPTER TWO CORE PRINCIPLES OF ORDER AND GOVERNMENT

### 2.01 HISTORIC PRINCIPLES OF CHURCH ORDER

In setting forth the following form of government, worship, and discipline, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) reaffirms the historic principles of Church order which have been a part of our common heritage in this nation and which are basic to our Presbyterian concept and system of church government, namely:

2.0101 *God is Lord of the Conscience.*

2.0101a. God alone is lord of the conscience, and has left it free from human doctrines and commandments that are in any way contrary to God's Word in matters of faith and worship

2.0101b. Thus we consider that the right of private judgment with respect to religion is inalienable. We therefore do not wish to see any religious constitution aided by civil authority further than may be necessary for protection and security.

2.0102 *Right of Self-determination*

Every Christian church has the right to declare the terms of admission to its membership, the qualifications of its officers, and the system of its internal government.

2.0103 *Officers*

Christ has appointed officers to lead the church as it preaches the gospel, administers the sacraments, and exercises ecclesiastical discipline.

2.0104 *Truth and Goodness*

Truth is necessary for goodness, and thus there is an inseparable connection between faith and practice, truth and duty.

2.0105 *Mutual Forbearance*

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<sup>3</sup>This statement of the great ends of the Church, slightly edited here, came from the United Presbyterian Church of North America, which united with the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America in 1958. The statement was then made a part of the Constitution of The United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, as the united body was called. This now classic statement was adopted by the United Presbyterian Church of North America in 1910, following various actions between 1904 and 1910 looking forward to the revision of the church's Constitution.

There are truths and forms about which people of good character may differ, and thus it is the duty of both private Christians and societies to exercise mutual forbearance toward each other.

2.0106 *Right of Election of Officers*

Every congregation has the right to elect its own officers, subject to the qualifications laid down in scripture and the investiture prescribed by the polity of the ecclesiastical society of which that congregation is a part.

2.0107 *Church Power*

All church power is ministerial and declarative, and thus:

2.0107a The scripture is the only infallible rule of faith and practice;

2.0107b Decisions of governing bodies should be founded on the will of God revealed in scripture;

2.0107c Since “all synods and councils may err,” no church governing body ought to seek to make laws which bind the conscience of believers;

2.0107d Preference shall be shown to established church law over against the making of new law, recognizing that all law is the product of human fallibility.

2.0108 *The Value of Ecclesiastical Discipline*

Ecclesiastical discipline is purely moral and spiritual; it is not attended with any civil effects, nor can it derive any force whatever but from its own justice, the approbation of an impartial public, and the countenance and blessing of the great Head of the Church universal. Nonetheless, the vigor and strictness of its discipline contributes directly to the glory and happiness of any church.<sup>4</sup>

**2.02 PRINCIPLES OF PRESBYTERIAN GOVERNMENT**

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) reaffirms, within the context of its commitment to the Church universal, a special commitment to basic principles of Presbyterian polity:

2.0201 *One Church*

The particular churches of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) wherever they are, taken collectively, constitute one church.

2.0202 *Governed by Presbyters*

This church shall be governed by presbyters, that is, elders and ministers of the Word and Sacrament, traditionally called ruling and teaching elders.

2.0203 *Gathered in Governing Bodies*

These presbyters shall come together in governing bodies (traditionally called judicatories or courts) in regular gradation. All governing bodies of the church are united by the nature of the church and share with one another responsibilities, rights, and powers as provided in this Constitution. The governing bodies are separate and independent, but have such mutual relations

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<sup>4</sup> The historic principles of order contained in this section are redrafted from those first drawn up by the Synod of New York and Philadelphia, and prefixed to the Form of Government as published by that body in 1788. In that year, the synod was divided into four synods and gave place to the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, which held its first meeting the following year. The four synods formed were the Synod of New York and New Jersey, the Synod of Philadelphia, the Synod of Virginia, and the Synod of the Carolinas. The presbyteries of these four synods were represented in the first General Assembly, which met in Philadelphia on May 21, 1789. The general plan drawn up in 1788 became that by which the Presbyterian Church in the United States and The United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America were subsequently governed.

that the act of one of them is the act of the whole church performed by it through the appropriate governing body.

2.0204 *Seek and Represent the Will of Christ*

Presbyters are not simply to reflect the will of the people, but rather to seek together to find and represent the will of Christ.

2.0205 *Decision by Majority Vote*

Decisions shall be reached in governing bodies by vote, following opportunity for discussion, and a majority shall govern; nonetheless, we affirm the value of alternate means of decision-making by governing bodies where appropriate and useful for their health.

2.0206 *Review and Control*

A higher governing body shall have the right of review and control over a lower one and shall have power to determine matters of controversy upon reference, complaint, or appeal.

2.0207 *Ordination by Governing Body*

Presbyters are ordained only by the authority of a governing body.

2.0208 *Shared Power, Exercised Jointly*

Ecclesiastical jurisdiction is a shared power, to be exercised jointly by presbyters gathered in governing bodies.

2.0209 *General Authority of Governing Bodies*

Governing bodies possess whatever administrative authority is necessary to give effect to duties and powers assigned by the Constitution of the church. The jurisdiction of each governing body is limited by the express provisions of the Constitution, with powers not mentioned being reserved to the presbyteries.

**2.03 PRESBYTERIAN COMMITMENTS TO THE GREATER CHURCH**

2.0301 *Heritage and Renewal*

Presbyterian government seeks to be aware of and faithful to the heritage of the Christian Church throughout the ages, while simultaneously remaining open to the renewing activity of the Holy Spirit.

2.0302 *Ecumenicity*

Presbyterian government as described in this Form of Government is grounded in scripture but is not regarded as essential for the existence of the Christian church nor required of all Christians.

2.0303 *Diversity and Inclusiveness*

The church is called to give full expression to the rich diversity of its membership, and shall include that diversity in its worship and government, guaranteeing full participation and access to representation in the decision making of the church.

**2.04 THE CONSTITUTION OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (U.S.A) DEFINED**

The *Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)* consists of *The Book of Confessions* and *The Book of Order*. Each particular congregation of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) shall be governed by this Constitution.

*The Book of Confessions* includes:

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

The *Book of Order* includes:

- The Foundations of Presbyterian Polity
- The Form of Government
- The Directory for Worship
- The Rules of Discipline.

## CHAPTER THREE THE CHURCH AND ITS CONFESSIONS

### 3.01 The Purpose of Confessional Statements

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) states its faith and bears witness to God's grace in Jesus Christ in the creeds and confessions in *The Book of Confessions*. 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 Christian tradition; they direct the church in maintaining sound doctrines; they equip the church for its work of proclamation. They serve to strengthen personal commitment and the life and witness of the community of believers.

### 3.02 The Confessions as Subordinate Standards

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. While confessional standards are subordinate to the Scriptures, they are, nonetheless, standards. They are not lightly drawn up or subscribed to, nor may they be ignored or dismissed. The church is prepared to counsel with or even to discipline one ordained who seriously rejects the faith expressed in the confessions. Moreover, a more exacting amendment process is required to change the confessions of the church than is required to change the Constitution in matters of government, worship, or discipline. Yet the church, in obedience to Jesus Christ, is open to the reform of its standards of doctrine as well as of governance. The church affirms *Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda*, that is, "The church reformed, always being reformed," according to the Word of God and the call of the Spirit.

### 3.03 The Confessions as Statements of the Faith of the Church Catholic

In its confessions, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) witnesses to the faith of the Church catholic. The confessions express the faith of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church in the recognition of canonical Scriptures and the formulation and adoption of the ecumenical creeds, notably the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds with their definitions of the mystery of the triune God and of the incarnation of the eternal Word of God in Jesus Christ.

**3.04 The Confessions as Statements of the Faith of the Protestant Reformation**

In its confessions, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) identifies with the affirmations of the Protestant Reformation. The focus of these affirmations is the rediscovery of God’s grace in Jesus Christ as revealed in the Scriptures. The Protestant watchwords—grace alone, faith alone, Scripture alone—embody principles of understanding which continue to guide and motivate the people of God in the life of faith.

**3.05 The Confessions as Statements of the Faith of the Reformed Tradition**

In its confessions, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) expresses the faith of the Reformed tradition. Central to this tradition is the affirmation of the majesty, holiness, and providence of God who creates, sustains, rules, and redeems the world in the freedom of sovereign righteousness and love. Related to this central affirmation of God’s sovereignty are other great themes of the Reformed tradition:

- (1) The election of the people of God for service as well as for salvation;
- (2) Covenant life marked by a disciplined concern for order in the church according to the Word of God;
- (3) A faithful stewardship that shuns ostentation and seeks proper use of the gifts of God’s creation;
- (4) The recognition of the human tendency to idolatry and tyranny, which calls the people of God to work for the transformation of society by seeking justice and living in obedience to the Word of God.