

THE FOUNDATIONS OF PRESBYTERIAN POLITY

CHAPTER ONE

THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH¹

F-1.01 GOD'S MISSION

The mission of the one triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit— gives substance and form to the Church and its mission into the world. This one living God, the Scriptures say, creates, sustains, rules, redeems, reconciles, and recreates all things. God is revealed to us by the power of the Spirit through the sending of Christ to live among us, to die for us, and to rise again to new life. As the Church follows Christ in the world, it participates in Christ's mission—proclaiming to all people the good news of God's love, offering to all people the grace of God at font and table, and calling all people to discipleship in Christ. As it is faithful to Christ's mission, the Church is filled with hope in the fulfillment of God's purpose. Along with Christians everywhere, Presbyterians have no higher goal in life or in death than to live in covenant fellowship with God, to embrace and serve God's mission, to glorify and enjoy God now and forever.

F-1.02 JESUS CHRIST IS HEAD OF THE CHURCH

1.0201 *The Authority of Christ*

Almighty God, who raised Jesus Christ from the dead and set him above all rule and authority, has given to him all power 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. The Church's life and mission are a joyful participation in Christ's ongoing life and work

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, calls, teaches, and uses the Church as he wills.

1.0203 *Christ Gives the Church Its Life*

Christ gives to the Church its faith and life, its unity and mission, its order and discipline. Scripture teaches us of Christ's will for the Church, which 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.

1.0204 *Christ Is the Church's Hope*

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.

1.0205 *Christ Is the Foundation of the Church*

In Christ all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through Christ God reconciles all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of the cross (Col. 1:16–23). In Christ's name, therefore, the Church is sent out to bear witness to the good news of reconciliation with God and with others. In Christ the Church receives its truth and appeal, its holiness, and its unity.

¹ Throughout this document and the Form of Government, the capitalized term "Church" refers to the Church Universal, the Church as it is called to be in Christ; the lower-case term "church" refers to denominations, except as part of a title (i.e. Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)). In place of the vernacular use of "church" to denote a congregation of believers, the term "congregation" is used.

F-1.03 THE CALLING OF THE CHURCH*1.0301 The Church Is the Body of Christ*

The Church is the body of Christ. Christ gives to the Church all the gifts necessary to be his body and calls the Church to demonstrate these gifts in its life as a community in the world (1 Cor. 12:27–28):

The Church is to be a community of faith, entrusting itself to God alone as it responds to Christ’s call, even at the risk of losing its life.

The Church is to be a community of hope, rejoicing in the sure and certain knowledge that, in Christ, God is making a new reality. This reality is a new creation and a new beginning for human life in the world, where sin is forgiven, reconciliation is accomplished, and the dividing walls of hostility are torn down. The Church lives in the present on the strength of that promised new reality.

The Church is to be a community of love, living in harmony, seeking reconciliation, and overcoming evil with good.

The Church is to be a community of witness, pointing beyond itself through word and work to the good news of God’s transforming grace in Christ Jesus its Lord.

1.0302 The Marks of the Church²

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

a. The Apostolicity of the Church

Apostolicity is God’s gift to the Church in Jesus Christ. In Christ God acts to seek and find the lost, lift up the least among us, break down the dividing walls of hostility, defeat the powers of sin, evil, and death, establish a just community of mutual self-giving love, and bring in the kingdom of eternal life forever in joyful celebration and communion with God.

The apostolicity of the Church is also our calling. The Church is called into covenant fellowship with God. Within that covenant fellowship, the Church receives the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ through the testimony of those whom Christ sent, both those whom we call apostles and those whom Christ has called throughout the long history of the Church. The Church has been and is even now sent into the world by Jesus Christ to bear that testimony to others. The Church bears witness in word and work that, in Christ, the new age has dawned, and that God who creates life also frees those in bondage, forgives sin, reconciles brokenness, makes all things new, and is still at work in the world.

The Church is sent to be faithful to the good news it has received and accountable to the standards of the confessions. The Church is called to present the claims of Jesus Christ, leading persons to repentance, acceptance of Christ alone as Savior and Lord, and new life as his disciples.

The Church is sent to be Christ’s faithful evangelist:

making disciples of all nations in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit;

sharing with others a deep life of worship, prayer, fellowship and service; and

participating in God’s mission to care for the needs of the sick, poor, and lonely; to free people from sin, suffering, and oppression; and to establish Christ’s just, loving, and peaceable rule in the world.

b. The Catholicity of the Church

Catholicity is God’s gift to the Church in Jesus Christ. In the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, God overcomes our alienation and repairs our division.

² See “The Nicene Creed,” *The Book of Confessions*, 1.3.

The catholicity of the Church is also our calling. As the body of Christ, the Church catholic is called to embrace people of all times and places, all races and nations, both genders and all ages, all persons regardless of station in life. The catholicity of the Church summons the Church to a deeper faith, a larger hope, and a more complete love as it bears witness to God's grace.

c. *The Holiness of the Church*

Holiness is God's gift to the Church in Jesus Christ. In the suffering and forgiving love of Christ God takes away the sin of the world. The holiness of the Church comes from Christ who calls it to bear witness to his suffering love, and not from the purity of its doctrine or the righteousness of its actions.

The holiness of the Church is also our calling. In grateful response to Christ's redemptive work, the Church, its members, and those in its ordered ministries, are called to lead lives worthy of the gospel we proclaim. We rely upon the work of God's Spirit through Scripture and the means of grace to form every believer and every community for this holy living. At the same time, 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.

d. *The Unity of the Church*

Unity is God's gift to the Church in Jesus Christ. Just as God is one God and Jesus Christ is our one Savior, so the Church is one because it belongs to its one Lord, Jesus Christ. The Church seeks to include all people and is never content to enjoy the benefits of Christian community for itself alone. There is one Church, for there is one Spirit, one hope, "one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all" (Eph. 4:5–6).

The unity of the Church is also our calling. To be united with Christ is to be joined with all those who are in Christ. To be thus joined with one another is to become priests for one another, praying for the world and for one another and sharing the various gifts God has given to each Christian for the benefit of the whole community. Division into different denominations does not destroy unity in Christ, but it obscures our unity for both the Church and the world. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), affirming its historical continuity with the whole Church of Jesus Christ, is committed to the reduction of that obscurity, and is willing to seek and to deepen communion with all other churches within the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church.

1.0303 *The Notes of the Reformed Church*³

Where Christ is, there is the true Church. Since the earliest days of the Reformation, Reformed Christians have marked the presence of the true Church wherever
the Word of God is truly preached and heard,
the Sacraments are rightly administered, and
ecclesiastical discipline is uprightly ministered.

In our own time, we affirm that the Church is faithful to the mission of Christ in
proclaiming and hearing the Word of God in Scripture as the vision of God's new reality in Christ, and inviting all
people to participate in that reality;
administering and receiving the Sacraments as visions of the blessed community and the heavenly banquet, and
committing itself to solidarity with the marginalized and the hungry; and
nurturing a covenant community of disciples of Christ who live in the strength of God's promise and give
themselves in service to God's mission.

1.0304 *The Great Ends of the Church*

The great ends of the Church are:

³ See The Scots Confession, Ch. XVIII (*The Book of Confessions*, 3.18)

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.⁴

CHAPTER TWO

THE CHURCH AND ITS CONFESSIONS

F-2.01 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*. In these statements the church declares to its members and to the world who and what it is, what it believes, and what it resolves to do. These statements identify the church as a community of people known by its convictions as well as by its actions. They guide the church in its study and interpretation of the Scriptures; they summarize the essence of Reformed Christian tradition; they direct the church in maintaining sound doctrines; they equip the church for its work of proclamation. They serve to strengthen personal commitment and the life and witness of the community of believers.

The creeds and confessions of this church arose in response to particular circumstances within the history of God’s people. They are the result of prayer, thought, and experience within a living tradition, but they also reflect the social and cultural assumptions of their time. They affirm a common faith tradition, while also from time to time standing in tension with each other.

F-2.02 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 instruct, counsel with, or even to discipline one ordained who seriously rejects the faith expressed in the confessions. Moreover, the process for changing the confessions of the church is deliberately demanding, requiring a high degree of consensus across the church. 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 secundum verbum Dei*, that is, “The church reformed, always to be reformed according to the Word of God” in the power of the Spirit.

F-2.03 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.

⁴This 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.

F-2.04 The Confessions as Statements of the Faith of the Protestant Reformation

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

F-2.05 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 in Christ and by the power of the Spirit 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:

The election of the people of God for service as well as for salvation;

Covenant life marked by a disciplined concern for order in the church according to the Word of God;

A faithful stewardship that shuns ostentation and seeks proper use of the gifts of God’s creation; and

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.

CHAPTER THREE

PRINCIPLES OF ORDER AND GOVERNMENT

F-3.01 HISTORIC PRINCIPLES OF CHURCH ORDER⁵

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

3.0101 God Is Lord of the Conscience

a. That “God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men⁶ which are in anything contrary to his Word, or beside it, in matters of faith or worship.”⁷

b. Therefore we consider the rights of private judgment, in all matters that respect religion, as universal and unalienable: We do not even wish to see any religious constitution aided by the civil power, further than may be necessary for protection and security, and at the same time, be equal and common to all others.

3.0102 Corporate Judgment

That, in perfect consistency with the above principle of common right, every Christian Church, or union or association of particular churches, is entitled to declare the terms of admission into its communion, and the qualifications of its ministers and members, as well as the whole system of its internal government which Christ hath appointed; that in the exercise of this right they may, notwithstanding, err, in making the terms of communion either too lax or too narrow; yet, even in this case, they do not infringe upon the liberty or the rights of others, but only make an improper use of their own.

⁵ This section, with the exception of the first paragraph, was 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.

⁶ The words “men” and “man’s” throughout this quotation from the eighteenth century should be understood as applying to all persons.

⁷ See the Westminster Confession of Faith (*The Book of Confessions*, 6.109).

3.0103 *Officers*

That our blessed Savior, for the edification of the visible Church, which is his body, hath appointed officers,⁸ not only to preach the gospel and administer the Sacraments, but also to exercise discipline, for the preservation of both truth and duty; and that it is incumbent upon these officers, and upon the whole Church, in whose name they act, to censure or cast out the erroneous and scandalous, observing, in all cases, the rules contained in the Word of God.

3.0104 *Truth and Goodness*

That truth is in order to goodness; and the great touchstone of truth, its tendency to promote holiness, according to our Savior's rule, "By their fruits ye shall know them." And that no opinion can either be more pernicious or more absurd than that which brings truth and falsehood upon a level, and represents it as of no consequence what a man's opinions are. On the contrary, we are persuaded that there is an inseparable connection between faith and practice, truth and duty. Otherwise it would be of no consequence either to discover truth or to embrace it.

3.0105 *Mutual Forbearance*

That, while under the conviction of the above principle we think it necessary to make effectual provision that all who are admitted as teachers be sound in the faith, we also believe that there are truths 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.

3.0106 *Election by the People*

That though the character, qualifications, and authority of Church officers⁸ are laid down in the Holy Scriptures, as well as the proper method of their investiture and institution, yet the election of the persons to the exercise of this authority, in any particular society, is in that society.

3.0107 *Church Power*

That all Church power, whether exercised by the body in general or in the way of representation by delegated authority, is only ministerial and declarative; that is to say, that the Holy Scriptures are the only rule of faith and manners; that no Church judicatory⁹ ought to pretend to make laws to bind the conscience in virtue of their own authority; and that all their decisions should be founded upon the revealed will of God. Now though it will easily be admitted that all synods and councils may err, through the frailty inseparable from humanity, yet there is much greater danger from the usurped claim of making laws than from the right of judging upon laws already made, and common to all who profess the gospel, although this right, as necessity requires in the present state, be lodged with fallible men.

3.0108 *The Value of Ecclesiastical Discipline*

Lastly, that if the preceding scriptural and rational principles be steadfastly adhered to, the vigor and strictness of its discipline will contribute to the glory and happiness of any church. Since ecclesiastical discipline must be purely moral or spiritual in its object, and not attended with any civil effects, it can derive no 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.

⁸ The term "officers" and "office" is preserved here as part of the historic language of the Principles. Elsewhere in the Form of Government the terms "ordered minister" and "ordered ministry" are used in place of "officer" and "office."

⁹ The term "judicatory," employed here as part of the historical language of the Principles, is elsewhere in the Form of Government replaced with "council."

F-3.02 PRINCIPLES OF PRESBYTERIAN GOVERNMENT¹⁰

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:

3.0201 One Church

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

3.0202 Governed by Presbyters

This church shall be governed by presbyters, that is, ruling and teaching elders, also called elders and ministers of the Word and Sacrament. Ruling elders are so named not because they “lord it over” the congregation (Matt. 20:25), but because they are chosen by the congregation to discern and measure its fidelity to the Word of God, and to strengthen and nurture its faith and life. Teaching elders, also called ministers of the Word and Sacrament, shall be committed in all their work to equipping the people of God for their ministry and witness.

3.0203 Gathered in Councils

These presbyters shall come together in councils in regular gradation. These councils are sessions, presbyteries, synods, and the General Assembly. All councils 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 councils are distinct, but have such mutual relations that the act of one of them is the act of the whole church performed by it through the appropriate council. The larger part of the church, or a representation thereof, shall govern the smaller.

3.0204 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.

3.0205 Decision by Majority Vote

Decisions shall be reached in councils by vote, following opportunity for discussion and discernment, and a majority shall govern.

3.0206 Review and Control

A higher council 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.

3.0207 Ordination by Council

Presbyters (ruling and teaching elders) and deacons are ordained only by the authority of a council.

3.0208 Shared Power, Exercised Jointly

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

¹⁰ This provision is derived from and intended to restate the Historic Principles of Church Government, which were adopted in 1797 by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, and the Principles of Presbyterian Government. In this quotation, the word “radical” is used in its primary meaning of “fundamental and basic,” and the word “appeals” is used in a general sense rather than with reference to a case involved in judicial process: “The radical principles of Presbyterian church government and discipline are: ‘That the several different congregations of believers, taken collectively, constitute one Church of Christ, called emphatically the Church; that a larger part of the Church, or a representation of it, should govern a smaller, or determine matters of controversy which arise therein; that, in like manner, a representation of the whole should govern and determine in regard to every part, and to all the parts united: that is, that a majority shall govern; and consequently that appeals may be carried from lower to higher governing bodies, till they be finally decided by the collected wisdom and united voice of the whole Church. For these principles and this procedure, the example of the apostles and the practice of the primitive Church are considered as authority.’”

3.0209 *General Authority of Councils*

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

F-3.03 OPENNESS TO THE GUIDANCE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

3.0301 *Heritage and Renewal*

The presbyterian form of government in the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is grounded in Scripture and built around the marks of the true Church. Nonetheless, the presbyterian form of government is always subject to the Lord of the Church who calls it forth in different forms at different times and in different places. Jesus Christ draws worshiping communities and individual believers into the sovereign activity of the triune God in all times and places. As the Church seeks reform and fresh direction, it looks to Jesus Christ who goes ahead of us and calls us to follow him. United with Christ in the power of the Spirit, the Church seeks “not [to] be conformed to this world, but [to] be transformed by the renewing of [our] minds, so that [we] may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Rom 12:2).

3.0302 *Ecumenicity*

The presbyterian government, in the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), is grounded in Scripture but is not regarded as essential for the existence of the Christian Church nor required of all Christians.

3.0303 *Diversity and Inclusiveness*

As the unity of the One God is expressed in the diverse community of the Trinity, so also the unity of the Church is expressed in the rich diversity of its membership. The Church is called to give full expression in its membership to the diversity of the human family, and shall be responsive to that diversity in its worship, government and emerging life. Persons of all racial ethnic groups, different ages, both sexes, various disabilities, diverse geographical areas, different theological positions consistent with the Reformed tradition, as well as different marital conditions (married, single, widowed, or divorced) shall be guaranteed full participation and access to representation in the decision making of the church. It shall not deny participation or representation to persons or groups within its membership for any reasons other than those stated in this Constitution.

3.0304 *Openness*

In Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all creation, the Church is called to a new openness to God’s mission in the world. In Christ, the triune God tends the least among us, suffers the curse on human sinfulness, raises up a new humanity, and promises a new future for all creation. In Christ, church members share with all humanity the realities of creatureliness, sinfulness, brokenness, and suffering, as well as the future toward which God is drawing them. The mission of God pertains not only to the Church but also to people everywhere and to all creation. As it participates in God’s mission, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is called:

to a new openness to the sovereign activity of God in the Church and in the world, to a more radical obedience to Christ, and to a more joyous celebration in worship and work;

to a new openness in its own membership, becoming in fact as well as in faith a community of women and men of all ages, races, ethnicities, and conditions, as a visible sign of the new humanity;

to a new openness to the possibilities and perils of its institutional forms in order to ensure the faithfulness and usefulness of these forms to God’s activity in the world; and

to a new openness to God’s continuing reformation of the Church ecumenical, that it might be more effective in its mission.

3.0305 *Foundational Statements*

The statements contained in this section, ‘The Foundations of Presbyterian Polity,’ describe the ecclesiological and historical commitments on which the polity of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) rests. Provisions of any part of this

Constitution are to be interpreted in light of the whole Constitution. No provision of the *Book of Order* can of itself invalidate any other. Where there are tensions and ambiguities between provisions, it is the task of councils and judicial commissions to resolve them in such a way as to give effect to all provisions.

F-3.04 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*.

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 Westminster Shorter Catechism

The Westminster Larger 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.