

THE FOUNDATIONS OF PRESBYTERIAN POLITY

CHAPTER ONE THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

F-1.01 GOD'S ACTIVITY

The mission of the Church is given form and substance by the sovereign activity of the Triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Church bears witness to this one God's sovereign activity in the world as told in the Bible and received by faith through the confessions of the people of God. The Church recognizes this activity of God in the goodness of creation and in the story of God's dealings with humanity and with the children of Abraham; in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ; and in God's sustaining, forgiving, and demanding grace that forever issues in the call to discipleship. The Church proclaims that in the one God's threefold work it finds its assurance of blessing, its call to ministries of compassion and justice, and its hope for itself and for the world.

F-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 order and discipline. 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.

1.0204 *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.

F-1.03 THE CALLING 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 that 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:

Sin is forgiven.

Reconciliation is accomplished.

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*¹

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

a. *The Apostolicity of the Church*

The Church is apostolic because it receives the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ through the testimony of those whom Christ sent, and because it is itself sent into the world by Jesus Christ to bear that testimony to others. The mission of the Church is to proclaim 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, and is still at work in the world.

The Church is called 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 him as Savior and Lord, and new life as his disciples.

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

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;

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;

participating in God’s activity in the world through its life for others.

b. *The Catholicity of the Church*

The Church is catholic because Jesus Christ is Lord of all creation. The body of Christ, the Church catholic, embraces all times and places, all races and nations, all genders and ages, all persons regardless of station in life. The Church catholic is marked by the fullness of faith, the wholeness of hope, and the completeness of love, lived in communion with all who confess Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

A congregation consists of persons in a particular place and time who profess faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, gather to worship God, listen for God’s Word in Scripture, commit themselves to God’s mission in the world, and order their common life in fidelity to the gospel, together with the children of the congregation. Congregations are called to express fully the catholicity of the Church, so that all are embraced within the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit.

¹ See The Nicene Creed, *The Book of Confessions*, 1.3.

c. *The Holiness of the Church*

The Church is holy because it is called out of and sent into the world so that it may serve its Lord. Its holiness inheres 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, and not in the purity of its doctrine, nor in the righteousness of its actions, nor even in the truth of its message.

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 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*

The Church is one because it belongs to one Lord, Jesus Christ. The Church is a fellowship of believers that 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 all" (Eph. 4:5–6).

The unity of the Church is both God's gift and our calling. 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.

1.0303 *The Notes of the Reformed Church*

To be reconciled to God is to be sent into the world as God's reconciling community. This community, the Church catholic, is entrusted with God's message of reconciliation and shares God's labor of healing the enmities that separate us from God and from each other. Christ has called the Church to this mission and given it the gift of the Holy Spirit.² Reformed Christians have understood that the Church is faithful to this mission when it truly proclaims the Word of God, rightly administers the sacraments of Christ Jesus, and nurtures the covenant community through ecclesiastical discipline uprightly ministered.³

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.⁴

² See The Confession of 1967, II.1 (*The Book of Confessions*, 9.31)

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

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.

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. 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. They serve to strengthen personal commitment and the life and witness of the community of believers.

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, 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 to be reformed," according to the Word of God and the call 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.

F-2.04 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 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 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;

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 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:

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 Right of Self-determination

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

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).

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.

3.0103 Officers

That our blessed Savior, for the edification of the visible Church, which is his body, hath appointed officers, 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 Right of Election of Officers

That though the character, qualifications, and authority of Church officers 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 judicatory 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.

F-3.02 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:

3.0201 One Church

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

3.0202 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.

3.0203 Gathered in Councils

These presbyters shall come together in councils (traditionally called judicatories or courts) in regular gradation. 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 separate and independent, 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 a majority shall govern; nonetheless, without compromising this principle, we affirm the value of alternate means of discernment by councils where appropriate and useful for their health.

3.0206 Review and Control

A more inclusive council shall have the right of review and control over a less inclusive 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.

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*

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. In so doing, we are always mindful of the call to Christians that we “not be conformed to

this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Rom. 12:2).

3.0302 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.

3.0303 Diversity and Inclusiveness

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

3.0304 Openness

The church is called:

- to a new openness to the presence of God in the Church and in the world, to more fundamental obedience, and to a more joyous celebration in worship and work;
- to a new openness to its own membership, by affirming itself as a community of diversity, becoming in fact as well as in faith a community of women and men of all ages, races, and conditions, and by providing for inclusiveness 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;
- to a new openness to God’s continuing reformation of the Church ecumenical, that it might be a more effective instrument of mission in the world.

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 Larger Catechism
- The Westminster 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.