

INTRODUCTION

Four Presbyterian Characteristics: My Reflections



What is distinctive about Presbyterians? Dirk Wierenga chose a combination of text and words in *Presbyterians: A Spiritual Journey* to answer this question. He began by interviewing Presbyterians as he traveled across the country. Later he sent photographers to illustrate what he had found. He organized his book into three chapters: “Stories of Faith,” “Spiritual Communities,” and “Connectional Bodies.” The first chapter is about individuals, the second is about specific congregations and their mission; and the last deals with the larger church.¹

Wierenga joins numerous others from many perspectives who have provided answers to this question over the years. Books, periodicals, and web sites have emerged in the last fifty years espousing what it means to be distinctively Presbyterian. I join this chorus and add yet another personal testimony for consideration and discussion.

In this book, I will consider chapter IV of the *Book of Order*, which includes a section called “Principles of Presbyterian Government” (G-4.0300). Chapter I bears the title, “Preliminary Principles,” basic understandings drawn from our heritage. Among the sections are “The Historic Principles of Church Order” (G-1.0300) and “The Historic Principles of Church Government” (G-1.0400).

My contention is that chapter IV addresses the issue of what holds the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) together. The reunion of 1983, which reunited two Presbyterian denominations that had been separated since 1861, resulted in a major revision of the *Book of Order*.² This book deals with this historical development in a later chapter.

At this stage, I present four characteristics of Presbyterians I have known from various areas of the country—people with

varying degrees of responsibility and diverse theological and social perspectives. These folks share an ongoing commitment to and comfort with the Presbyterian way of being church. Those who find these qualities strange or wrong are invited to challenge them.

The four aspects of life in the Presbyterian Church that connects these persons all begin with the letter “d.” They are: dilemma, dialogue, debate, and deference.

Dilemma

The first aspect of being Presbyterian is comfort with **dilemma**. Presbyterians tend to be suspicious of simple answers. A dilemma is a difficult decision, in which the need for decision is urgent while the options are nearly equal in either a positive or negative way. A dilemma arises from a paradox, defined as a “a seemingly absurd or self-contradictory statement or proposition which when investigated or explained may prove to be well-founded or true.”³ Some, understanding that life is perplexing, would call this awareness of paradox realism. A situation of paradox can be created when both sides of a controversy find validity with their perspective. Op-ed columnist David Brooks, in a piece about theologian John Stott, wrote the following:

There’s been a lot of twaddle written recently about the supposed opposition between faith and reason. To read Stott is to see someone practicing “thoughtful allegiance” to scripture. For him, Christianity means probing the mysteries of Christ. He is always exploring paradoxes. Jesus teaches humility, so why does he talk about himself so much? What does it mean to gain power through weakness, or freedom through obedience? In many cases the truth is not found in the middle of apparent opposites, but on both extremes simultaneously.⁴

Neither Stott nor Brooks are Presbyterians, as far as I know. What Brooks offers is the clearest, most succinct description of paradox I have seen.

Dilemmas are the stuff of life. While we Americans celebrate the freedom to choose, we also appreciate that contemporary life often produces difficult, even painful choices. For example, advances in medical care mean that we now confront choices and challenges beyond our comprehension or preparation, such as

determining whether and when to remove life support for someone we love.

The central paradox of the Christian faith is the teaching that, as John's gospel puts it, "The Word became flesh and lived among us . . ." (John 1:14). How can it be that God becomes human? This divine paradox stands at the core of our faith, one that continues to trouble many, even after centuries of theological debate. Those few words of John challenge our assumptions about who God is and what we mean when we speak of God. Charles Wesley wrote,

Veiled in flesh, the Godhead see;
Hail the incarnate Deity,
Pleased in flesh with us to dwell,
Jesus, our Emmanuel.⁵

This is more than poetry set to music. It is, rather, a succinct affirmation of the central mystery of the Christian faith.

I submit that a benefit of recognizing a dilemma is the opportunity to revisit previous resolutions of continuing tensions in church life and to adjust the resolution in the light of fresh understandings and new insights. At the heart of our fellowship is an awareness that "time makes ancient good uncouth."⁶ The unavoidable challenge before us is to distinguish the issues behind the dilemmas and those that reflect the core of our faith. "[W]e have this treasure in clay jars," wrote the Apostle Paul (2 Cor. 4:7).

Paul also wrote about the "varieties of gifts" (1 Cor. 12:4ff, Eph. 4:11–13, Rom. 12:6–7). Discerning these gifts is yet another requirement of faithfulness to "the whole counsel of God."⁷ In a time when many impatiently dismiss complexity as too troubling, the challenge Presbyterians face is to continue to witness to the good news as offering strength to work through dilemmas to fresh insights.

Dilemmas or paradoxes are triggers for temptation, when one asks, "Should I or shouldn't I?" Dilemmas are perilous, as to some degree are all our choices, all our decisions. Some work out well. Others don't. Every choice has a cost, which sooner or later must be paid. Part of the cost is living with the way our choices turn out and then determining what we will do next. That is life, both inside and outside the church. The difference is that in the church we learn about forgiveness and new life.

Many Presbyterians have what psychologists call “tolerance for ambiguity.” This awareness of the complex issues of life contributes to a healthy humility, one that affirms convictions boldly and makes one willing to discuss the issues directly and skillfully, all the while understanding that a group decision is more likely to be more correct than an individual one. I have often found that my initial reaction to some actions of various Presbyterian entities has been negative, only later to discover that the decision made was more productive in the long run than I would have thought.

The “Preliminary Principles,” a document drafted at the same time as the “Constitution of the United States of America,” affirms eight principles of church order (G-1.0300), which present complex issues of life together in a community of faith.⁸ In 1797 the General Assembly articulated what we now call “The Historic Principles of Church Order,” proclaiming “that a majority shall govern . . .” (G-1.0400). This affirmation of democracy in the life of the church has major implications, which will emerge as we walk together on this quest to determine what is distinctive about Presbyterians.

Accepting the church as God’s gift to us, the body of Christ, Presbyterians understand that we are “bound to his authority and thus free to live in the lively, joyous reality of the grace of God” (G-1.0100d). Such a statement thrusts us into the paradox of being bound yet free, forgiven sinners.

Dialogue

A second aspect of being Presbyterian is a commitment to **dialogue**. To listen to God as Creator and Lord includes listening carefully to brothers and sisters through whom God’s Spirit often speaks. This last statement indicates a point at which there has been, and continues to be, serious difference among Presbyterians. It has historically been a challenge, one that has troubled Presbyterians, as well as other Christians and Jews, throughout history.

We see similarly diverging viewpoints in the Hebrew Bible around the issue of relating the Five Books of Moses and the Books of the Prophets. We see evidence of this ongoing tension in the New Testament in the dispute between the Pharisees and Sadducees. The question boils down to how the Ten Commandments were to be understood in the life of the covenant community of

Israel. How were the provisions from Mount Sinai to be understood as Israel's life situation changed?

The New Testament suggests that political situations further complicated this religious dispute. The writer of the Qumran cave manuscripts rails against "'seekers after smooth things,'" who could well be Pharisees.⁹ Anthony J. Saldarini summarizes his view of such groups as follows:

The Pharisaic association probably functioned as a social movement organization seeking to change society. The social, political, and economic situation of Palestinian Jews underwent a number of upheavals in the Greco-Roman period which demanded adaptation of Jewish customs and a reinterpretation of the Jewish identity fashioned by the biblical tradition. The Hasmoneans and the governing class changed Israel into a small, militarily active Hellenistic kingdom and took control of political and economic resources in order to control society. The Pharisees probably sought a new, communal commitment to a strict Jewish way of life based on adherence to the covenant.¹⁰

Saldarini's quote sheds light on the dynamics we find in Jesus' response to the question of John's disciples about fasting (Matt. 9:14). Putting a new patch on old cloth when the old is no longer functional only makes matters worse. Similarly, putting new, still-fermenting wine into a wineskin wrinkled with age means that both wine and container will be lost. The dilemma is determining when the new wine is worth conserving before time has passed.

When we Presbyterians have found ourselves facing a dilemma, at our best, we have sought to achieve resolution with dialogue. Describing such a process, G-1.0100c in the *Book of Order* states, "matters are to be ordered according to the Word by reason and sound judgment, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit."¹¹ The meanings and interrelationships of four terms—Word, reason, sound judgment, and Holy Spirit—are open to interpretation. As a whole, they illustrate a necessary, yet complex, dialogical process for determining the details of life together in a Presbyterian community. Each of these has served as a focus of Presbyterian disputes, alerting us to the need to be especially sensitive to the volatile nature of these aspects of our life together.

Much turn-of-the-millennium American controversy in both political and church circles has a focus on reason. What is usually termed “concern for principles” seems to me to be more accurately a quest for authority derived from principles or rules. I find it curious that much of the rhetoric from both ends of the political and ecclesiastical spectrums is their agreement that principles are essential. The popular way to describe the differences among them is to use labels such as “conservative” or “liberal,” or even “left” and “right,” as shorthand for the complex issues involved. Rather than discussing our differences, we base our correctness on a particular principle or set of principles that we assume to be more correct than those of the other side. Commitment to principle often leads to acrimony between adherents of the two positions.

Reason has a close comrade in this list: sound judgment. A phrase in the Westminster Confession, “a due use of the ordinary means,” used in reference to things that are necessary for salvation (6.007), describes this phenomenon. Today we might call it common sense.

The Presbyterian commitment to rationality can be traced to John Calvin, whose *Institutes of the Christian Religion* and his commentaries on Scripture reveal a tough-minded believer wrestling with presenting his faith in Jesus Christ as eminently reasonable. Calvin’s intent was educational:

Moreover, it has been my purpose in this labor to prepare and instruct candidates in sacred theology for the reading of the divine Word, in order that they may be able both to have easy access to it and to advance in it without stumbling. For I believe I have so embraced the sum of religion in all its parts, and have arranged it in such an order, that if anyone rightly grasps it, it will not be difficult for him to determine what he ought especially to seek in Scripture, and to what end he ought to relate its contents.¹²

Calvin appeals to both heart and head as he organizes his understanding of the Christian faith.

The Scots Confession, ratified in 1560, demonstrates how John Knox translated Calvin’s reasonable approach to Christian faith from a Reformed perspective into a confession of faith for the Church of Scotland. The Westminster Confession was an attempt of Presbyterians in England to explain their faith in a reasoned way. One hundred fifty-one persons worked from 1643 to

1649 to produce the confession and two catechisms.¹³ Adopted by American Presbyterians in 1729, these “Westminster Standards” continue to guide us. The adoption of the Confession of 1967 and A Brief Statement of Faith in 1991, as well as other historical confessional documents, provide rich evidence of how our Reformed heritage has continued to adapt to new situations.

The Book of Confessions is considered to be Part I of *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)* (G-1.0500). Elders and ministers vow in their ordination and installation to “receive and adopt the essential tenets of the Reformed faith as expressed in the confessions of our church as authentic and reliable expositions of what Scripture leads us to believe and do . . .” (G-14.0207c and G-14.0405b(3)). These confessions are the lens through which Presbyterians examine Scripture, and they have developed over centuries of reflection and discussion regarding what constitutes Christian faith from a particular perspective.

When the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America adopted *The Book of Confessions* in 1967, major opposition arose by those who felt that the Westminster Confession continued to be sufficient for church life. It has been interesting to note how those who were so vigorous in their opposition to *The Book of Confessions*, now seem to have forgotten that the Westminster Confessions is still in force. For example, Westminster’s extensive discussion of the authority of Scripture includes guidance that recourse is to be to the “whole counsel of God . . . [which] is either expressly set down in Scripture, or . . . may be deduced from Scripture.” In addition, “there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God and government of the Church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed.”¹⁴ Again, reasoned discussion finds a place in our Presbyterian process dating back to the mid-seventeenth century.

The Bible, which is expressed in the Westminster Confession as “Word,” continues to be for Presbyterians the “unique and authoritative witness” to the good news of Jesus Christ, the ultimate criterion of faith and practice (G-14.0207b and G-14.0405b(2)). The discovery of a specific scriptural instance of support for a certain practice is insufficient warrant for adopting that provision. Presbyterian practice is at its best when it carefully explores the “whole

counsel of God's word" prior to adopting some practice for church life—or excising it.

The goal for Presbyterian dialogue is not to win but to discover that God is calling us, individually and collectively, to faithful membership, as we shall see when we consider G-4.0300d. At this point the final characteristic, Holy Spirit, enters the discussion. As we will see further, Presbyterians understand the role of the Holy Spirit to be evident in community process, rather than in personal assertion.¹⁵

Debate

The third aspect of being Presbyterian is willingness to **debate**. The difference between dialogue and **debate** is subtle, yet significant. Dialogue involves discussion; conversation, exploration, and consideration are aspects of its dynamics. **Debate** is a formally prepared process of interchange, the result of which is determined by a third party. The difference is the degree of stress placed on those making the decision. The intent of debate is to fashion a useful resolution of the dilemma, the best resolution that those responsible are capable of making.

"Come now, let us argue it out, says the LORD . . ." (Isa. 1:18). "Argue it out" has replaced "reason together," which is found in older versions of the text. The more recent version may strike us as confrontational. Perhaps this is because we have forgotten that debate is supposed to be a civilized quest for resolution of disputes. Living in a sound-byte culture where media encourages alternate points of view—but only as long as they are limited to less than two or three minutes—means that patient, productive debate is increasingly difficult.

A further cultural factor is the emergence of confrontational advocacy. Americans have learned that zeal expressed through emotionally charged language is an effective device for a small group to get attention for their cause or perspective. "Staying on message" is the contemporary motto of advocacy. Stalwart repetition of claims has mostly replaced thoughtful exchange and reasoned discussion. "Attack ads" are generally acceptable and often supported by those who agree with their content. The casualty of these stratagems is the health of the community, no matter if this is a civil or ecclesiastical issue.

Recent experience in Presbyterian governing bodies suggests that the cultural patterns of interaction have invaded all public discourse. I find it almost amusing that those who are most earnest about traditional values have been quick to adopt these newer forms of advocacy. Commissioners in governing bodies rise with prepared speeches, written before the discussion has begun, to espouse their point of view, rather than seeking through debate or discussion to arrive at a reasonable resolution of whatever issue is being considered.

What seems to have been lost is the understanding that dialogue and debate are not about winning but about joining together in a quest for faithful discipleship. On a quest such as this, one more understood rule should prevail. Debate is a quest for truth, with awareness that what I understand to be a correct response in a given situation needs the contribution of my colleagues from a different perspective if it is to have the rigor necessary for coping with the complexities of life.

Deference

The fourth aspect of being Presbyterian is **deference**, which is also called civility, and in the language of the Bible, humility. For Presbyterians, deference is related to the doctrine of God's sovereignty. The *Book of Order* indicates that this doctrine affirms "the majesty, holiness, and providence of God who creates, sustains, rules, and redeems the world in the freedom of sovereign righteousness and love" (G-2.0500a). God is great in the way that God redeems and gives hope and energy to humankind, reminding us that we are only human. As Paul wrote to the Romans, "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgements and how inscrutable his ways!" (Rom. 11:33–34).

The majesty of the Creator inspires awe and humility in creatures. Appreciation of God's greatness is intensified by the wonder of God's forgiving love in Jesus Christ and the regular public confession of sin. The *Book of Common Worship* describes this aspect of worship as follows:

In words of scripture the people are called to confess the reality of sin in personal and common life. Claiming the promises of God sealed in our baptism, we humbly confess our sin. . . .

Having confessed our sin, we remember the promises of God's redemption, and the claims God has on all human life. The assurance of God's forgiving grace is declared in the name of Jesus Christ. We accept God's forgiveness, confident that in dying to sin, God raises us to new life.¹⁶

Notice that confession is for corporate as well as personal sin. Deference to one another in church life witnesses to awareness that each of us needs the others in the community of faith to enable us to grow in our discipleship. The following demonstrates how a prayer of confession provides the basis for community:

O Lord our God, you know who we are: men and women, girls and boys with good consciences and with bad; people who are content and those who are discontented; the certain and the uncertain; Christians by conviction and Christians by convention; those who believe, those who half believe, and those who disbelieve.

We now stand before you, in all our differences, yet alike in that we are all in the wrong with you and with one another.

Forgive us, cleanse us, renew us, unite us, redirect us by your grace promised to us and to all in Jesus Christ our Lord.¹⁷

We need one another as we seek to act in ways that are worthy of our calling. Such regular confession and assurance remind Presbyterians where we fit in the scheme of God's creation. God's gifts to people vary, and so we need to hear one another as we seek to live faithful lives.

The roots of this understanding of the human need for community reach back to Genesis 2, where God comments, 'It is not good for the human to be alone, I shall make a sustainer beside him.'¹⁸ Subsequently, a people comes into being, eventually receiving a covenant as the abiding foundation for community. We Presbyterians see ourselves as connected by a covenant, as described in the *Book of Order*:

The law and government of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) presuppose the fellowship of women and men with their children in voluntary covenanted relationship with one another and with God through Jesus Christ. The organization rests upon the fellowship and is not designed to work without trust and love. (G-7.0103)

Civility is essential to the health of a covenant community. Presbyterian history has not always exemplified deference or civility as we have sought to be faithful. The first schism between American Presbyterians arose in 1741. Led by Gilbert Tennent, the issue at stake was to determine whether or not the good news was being properly preached. The division into Old Side and New Side remained until 1758, when Tennent was elected moderator of the reunited synod. This was nine years after he had decided that the division was unfortunate and should be ended.¹⁹ There have been subsequent divisions and reconciliations throughout Presbyterian history in America. The tension between zeal on the one hand and civility on the other continues to trouble our fellowship as we look toward the Presbyterian tercentennial in 2010.

This concludes my reflections on what I propose to be four important personal characteristics of Presbyterians. My ministry has connected me with Presbyterians across the United States. It has been a privilege for me to be a member of six presbyteries.²⁰ This discussion also builds on my four years as a member of the General Assembly Council, the most carefully crafted diverse group of Presbyterians of which I have ever been a part. I recognize that appreciation for the four aspects I have discussed is rarely exemplified in one particular Presbyterian. Yet I feel that there is merit in suggesting that these are aspects that, if put into practice, would enable our fellowship to be a more effective witness to the gospel we profess.

Notes

1. Dick Wierenga, *Presbyterians: A Spiritual Journey* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 2000),
2. An earlier division, between the Old School and the New School in 1837–1838 was complicated by the Civil War.
3. “Paradox,” *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles*, 5th ed., vol. 2 (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press), p. 2092.
4. David Brooks, “Who Is John Stott” *New York Times*, 30 November 2004, sec. A p. 28.
5. “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing,” *The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), no. 31.

6. James Russell Lowell, "The Kingdom of God on Earth," in *The Hymnal* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Christian Education, 1933) no. 373.
7. The Westminster Confession of Faith, *The Book of Confessions: Study Edition. Part 1 of the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A)* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 1996), 6.006.
8. For a discussion of these, see my *History and Theology in the Book of Order: Blood on Every Page* (Louisville: Witherspoon Press, 1999).
9. Anthony J. Saldarini, "Pharisees," Vol. 5 of *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), p. 301.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 302.
11. I named this clause a "quadrate formula" and reflected on its implications in Chapman, *Finding Christ in the Book of Order* (Louisville: Witherspoon Press, 2003), pp. 63–66.
12. *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. XX, of *The Library of Christian Classics*, ed. John T. McNeil, trans. Ford Lewis Battle (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), p. 4.
13. *Book of Confessions: Study Edition, Part 1 of the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A)* (Louisville: Geneva Press), pp. 162–165.
14. The Westminster Confession of Faith, *The Book of Confessions*, 6.006.
15. For another treatment of these four qualities, see my *Finding Christ in the Book of Order* (Louisville: Witherspoon Press, 2003), pp. 61–65.
16. *Book of Common Worship*, ed. The Theology and Worship Ministry Unit (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), p. 35.
17. Church bulletin, West Side Presbyterian Church, Ridgewood, NJ, January 30, 2005, p. 2.
18. Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004), pp. 21–22.
19. See Milton J. Coalter, Jr., *Gilbert Tennet, Son of Thunder: A Case Study of Pietism's Impact on the First Great Awakening in the Middle Colonies*. A publication of the Presbyterian Historical Society (Westport: Greenwood Press, Inc., 1986).
20. In order, the presbyteries of Omaha, Winnebago, Monmouth, Washington City, Philadelphia, Palo Duro Union, and Palisades. Three of these names are no longer used. Omaha is now Missouri River Valley; Palo Duro Union is Palo Duro, and Washington City is now National Capital. I was a candidate under both Lansing (now Lake Michigan) and Philadelphia presbyteries.