

Finding Christ in the Book of Order

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Overlook

“Finding Christ” is a phrase that is difficult for me to write or say. Jesus Christ finds us where we are. If such were not the case, we would be in serious trouble. The essence of the Good News is that Jesus Christ finds us, a quest arising from God’s amazing love for you and me.

Yet we hunger for more understanding, for the witness of others who share the pilgrimage of faith with us. We read the New Testament, then expand our quest into what others say and write about their faith, their encounters with Christ. It is from other Christian disciples that we learn new aspects of our faith. We come to appreciate what it means to be part of the church that transcends geography, denominations, time itself.

The quest for spiritual food leads each of us into an interesting yet challenging search. There are dead ends, “discoveries” that seem to evaporate when exposed to the difficulties of faithful living. There are also more lasting insights from which we find continuing nourishment consistent with the witness of Scripture. Sometimes these surprise us while we are looking for something else. This book deals with a source for Presbyterians that many seem to have overlooked: the *Book of Order*.

I propose that the four initial paragraphs of G-1.0100 summarize how Presbyterians have demonstrated their commitment to the biblical witness in defining our particular community of faith. They invite us to reflect on how we might energize one another to move forward in the mission to which the Lord of the church has called us. The book’s objective is not to propose a specific statement or solution to some current controversy, but to propose a framework for working together from what appear to be axioms or middle terms, those understandings that are the foundation of our polity.

Overlook is an ambiguous word requiring a context in order for its meaning to be clear. When someone says, “I overlooked that possibility,” they admit that they ignored or missed something they should have considered. Sometimes what one has overlooked turns out to bring with it serious consequences. A driver who overlooks a traffic sign may get a traffic ticket for careless driving. Persons holding official positions in businesses or organizations are held responsible for what they should have known about practices within their organization.

I “discovered” the first four paragraphs in the *Book of Order* of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) as a polity teacher. I realized that I had overlooked G-1.0100. It was the experience of regularly dealing with seminarians and their questions about polity that gradually led me to an increasing appreciation for these paragraphs. I thank all those seminarians for their probing as well as their insistence that polity required a theological base.

Finding Christ

Have these paragraphs been overlooked? The *Annotated Book of Order* is where actions of the General Assembly and its Permanent Judicial Commission are displayed, paragraph by paragraph. There is, as of 2002, only one entry pertaining to G-1.0100, and that is a reference to Overture 00-21 from the Presbytery of Northumberland to the 212th General Assembly (2000). The overture proposed rewriting paragraphs G-1.0100 b, c, and d, inserting references to the role of Scripture. The presbytery, concerned about “the lack of a shared understanding concerning the place and role of Scripture,” offered nine “needs” in the life of our denomination that they felt would be met if their proposed revisions were adopted. The General Assembly chose not to approve the overture.¹

I have pondered, “Why have these paragraphs been overlooked?” One possibility is that we don’t expect to find such a compact theological statement in the *Book of Order*. As I argued in my earlier book, *History and Theology in the Book of Order*,² there is a tendency for Presbyterians to consider the *Book of Order* more as a manual of operations than as the result of working out the practical implications of our Reformed theology. We tend to focus on the specific question to which we want information when we open the *Book of Order*. Consequently we may consider theological material irrelevant to our concern, something for which we all need to seek forgiveness. I have been struck by the fact that in the recent discussions of the nature of Jesus Christ, particularly on how the church is related to its Lord, that the discussion has thus far been without references to G-1.0100.

A second possibility is that this brief section, “The Head of the Church,” comes at the beginning and seems to assert something we assume that we know. We know that the head of the church is Jesus Christ, whose name appears eleven times in this section as “Jesus” or “Jesus Christ,” along with seven pronouns referring to Christ. We expect to turn to the *Book of Confessions* when we are exploring our heritage as heirs of the Reformed tradition. One consequence is that many of us miss the connection between the two volumes of our Constitution (G-1.0500), or at least are unclear as to how these pieces fit together. What is sad is that these connections are spelled out for us in what we have overlooked.

A third possibility is that we have neglected to consider the *Book of Order* as a book to be read from the beginning. Whether it is our focus on solving a particular problem, or our hurry when dealing with what at first seems irrelevant, we have failed to give these four paragraphs the attention they deserve. Perhaps there is a tendency to dismiss the *Book of Order* as not worthy of a careful, reflective reading, of engaging the text with our questions and being open to fresh understandings.

Fourth, these paragraphs arose as a part of the reunion process, which was completed in 1983. While there were theological affirmations in both

predecessor volumes, the *Book of Order* of the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America and the *Book of Church Order* of the Presbyterian Church in the United States, the text of these four paragraphs was a result of the reunion process. Further discussion of its origins will be found in the Appendix.

Finally, it is possible that there is a “cloud of witnesses” who have found nourishment for their spiritual life in these four paragraphs, as well as in the text that follows. I applaud them and hope that these reflections may contribute to their deepening appreciation for our Presbyterian heritage. If this book enlarges the number of Presbyterians who are nourished from these paragraphs, I will consider my labors richly blessed.

While *overlook* can mean to omit or ignore, the other meaning of the word is primarily connected to its meaning as a noun: a place from which to view things below. We find overlooks beside highways, proving an opportunity to pull off the road and get a view of the countryside. In some places, these opportunities for a vista are filled with families, many taking pictures of the scene.

I propose that G-1.0100 provides an overlook as one opens the *Book of Order*, an opportunity to see what its purpose is.

On a vacation visit to Texas in August 2001, I learned about oak wilt, a disease affecting certain oak trees. This fungus is fatal to affected trees, with its two-pronged direct attack strategy focusing on the circulatory system of the tree. One pathway of distribution, what is called “the aboveground vector,” is through a certain species of beetle attracted by the sap of the tree. The disease can be spread from tree to tree as the beetle seeks food. The other vector is through the interconnected roots of oak trees, an underground approach. Infection by the fungus “clogs the vascular system of oak trees, preventing the flow of nutrients and water.”³

The fungus can be unwittingly transmitted by human agency. When dead trees are cut down for firewood, distribution of the pieces carries the fungus to new localities. Unless the wood has been dried under plastic for six months prior to distribution, the fungus infects those susceptible varieties of oaks in the vicinity.

What is sobering to those who appreciate having oak trees is that by the time leaf damage symptoms, such as fading color or outer edges turning inward, appear, the tree is probably already fatally infected. While oaks can be inoculated through the use of plugs soaked by the fungicide, the prospects of healing an infected tree are poor.

This illustration from the field of botany struck me with special force since many have become increasingly concerned that we in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) have neglected our roots. Proponents of various perspectives have emerged offering varying diagnoses with varying degrees