

*H*istory *and* *T*heology
in the
*B*ook of *O*rder

Blood on Every Page

with
Leader's Guide

William E. Chapman



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*I*ntroduction

*T*he subtitle of this book, *Blood on Every Page*, is drawn from a conversation with a Presbyterian elder. Like many, he had “married into the Presbyterian church” after being raised as a Roman Catholic, and was eventually elected an elder. Without any training or much awareness of what lay behind them, he assented to some vows when he was ordained. They sounded important, so he responded appropriately when the time came.

He was subsequently appointed elder to the personnel committee by the moderator. During his time of service on this committee, a conflict erupted on the pastoral staff. The elder found himself caught between two persons whom he considered friends. His distress was intensified by the volume and diversity of advice he received from members of the congregation. In response to the staff crisis, the elder decided to read the *Book of Order*, which he had received earlier. He approached it as people often approach the Bible during a crisis. He took his *Book of Order* with him on vacation, where he had time to read it from beginning to end!

The elder and I spoke at a social affair shortly after he finished this marathon reading. He initiated the conversation by asking whether I was still teaching polity at a Presbyterian seminary. When I said that I was, he got very serious and then gravely said, “Tell your students that our *Book of Order* has blood on every page.” Since then, I have used his phrase frequently. Of course there isn’t any actual blood on any page. However, this elder, in the middle of a difficult time for the church and for himself, discerned that the *Book of Order* contains evidence that church people had resolved painful conflicts in the past and had discovered better, wiser ways of approaching certain recurring tasks in the life of the church. His comment reflects a discerning eye that was able to appreciate the inherited wisdom found in the *Book of Order*.

Another discerning eye belonged to a sociologist of religion, Paul Harrison, whose description of church polity is more analytical.

Polity is the sociological manifestation of doctrinal belief; it is the political expression of the content of the gospel as interpreted by members of the religious group. However, polity, because it has other functions, is never the perfect expression of religious belief. Even a system of doctrine is never consistent in all respects. One of the most effective ways of discovering internal contradictions

within a doctrinal system is to study the dilemmas experienced by the church when its people attempt to express their beliefs through their polity.¹

Harrison describes, in sociological terms, the underlying dynamics of church polity. He calls attention to the dialectic between faith and order, noting that the correspondence between the two is never absolute.

Far from being chiseled in stone, every edition of the *Book of Order* prominently displays a time span during which that edition is valid. The dynamic noted by Harrison is thus validated in a small, yet strong way. Presbyterians spell out how the *Book of Order* is changed in G-18.0300. Changes, or amendments, are now printed in bold type the year after they are adopted. An index appears at the beginning of the *Book of Order* that lists where these changes can be found.

There is gentle humor in the fact that the hallmark of change in the *Book of Order* is printed in Latin—the only instance of Latin found in the *Book of Order*. The last line of G-2.0200 reads,

The church affirms *Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda*, that is, ‘the church reformed, always reforming’ according to the Word of God and the call of the Spirit.²

This study of Presbyterian Polity is a reminder that we, in the Reformed tradition, take history seriously, seeking to learn from the past as we face issues of faith in the present. It proposes an approach to understanding the *Book of Order* that recognizes this inherent dynamic of polity as a valuable guide.

In the first chapter of the *Book of Order* (not arranged chronologically as might be expected), are principles that have guided Presbyterians on their journey, and which still undergird the *Book of Order*. Footnotes to these principles reveal dates such as 1788, 1797, and 1910.³ This material still appears as originally written, complete with complex, difficult to understand sentences and gender-specific pronouns. One very important, but too often overlooked, section of this chapter bears the title, “The Historic Principles of Church Order” (G-1.0300).

Echoing Harrison, the Report of the Special Committee on Historic Principles, Conscience, and Church Government to the 1983 General Assembly of the just reunited Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) stated:

The polity of Presbyterianism—with its strong insistence on the rule of the majority and the rights of the minority—is indeed the way in which Presbyterians affirm their unity amid their diversity. This polity not only organizes dissent and diversity, it is itself a product of dissent, diversity, compromise, and the creative resolution of bitter conflict.⁴

On May 23, 1785, the Synod of New York and Philadelphia created a committee of ten ministers whose stated objective was to

take into consideration, the Constitution of the Church of Scotland, & other Protestant Churches; & agreeably to the general principles of Presbyterian Government, compile a system of general rules for the Government of the Synod, & the several Presbyteries under their inspection; & the People in their communion. & to make a report of their proceeding at the next meeting of Synod.⁵

The Synod finally voted “to ratify, & adopt the same, as now altered, & amended, as the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church in America”⁶ on Wednesday, May 28, 1788. The Historic Principles were part of this vote. The following day, the synod divided itself into four synods and called the first meeting of the General Assembly for the following May.⁷ This account validates the characterization by the 1983 Special Committee of the Polity of Presbyterianism as “a product of dissent, diversity, compromise, and the creative resolution of bitter conflict.”⁸

The members of the committee were all ministers, including John Witherspoon who had signed the Declaration of Independence twelve years earlier. These pastors were living in a time when the writing and ratification of a Constitution for a new nation involved everyone. The guidance of the synod, through debate and amendment, was direct and vigorous. However, there was also a commitment to being Presbyterian and figuring out how to import that tradition into the new continent. Through it all, the commitment of synod was to building up the body of Christ.

My first exposure to the Historic Principles was in the mid-seventies when I first became a reader at a reading group for grading the ordination examinations administered by Presbyteries’ Cooperative Committee on Examinations for Candidates. The Examination in Church Polity included a required question on the Historic Principles. The person explaining the question and the response told us that the reason such material was included was to ensure that each candidate understood the Presbyterian ethos. No clarification was given as to why this was so. The impression I gained was that the principles were Presbyterian roots and were important simply because they were roots.

The purpose of this book is to provide an approach to the Historic Principles that provides insight about the Presbyterian ethos. The Historic Principles provide the framework for exploration. Each principle identifies a tension that is present in the life of Christian community and in so doing provides cautions for us as we go about our mission. These tensions could be called paradoxes, polarities, or even dilemmas. Whatever they are called, they are a fact of life in any religious community. By identifying them, the Historic Principles serve to provide “way-points” as we seek to be faithful disciples.

In order to understand the Historic Principles, we need to use a careful method of interpretation. Our guide for interpretation will be G-1.0500, where the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is defined as the *Book of Confessions*, and the *Book of Order*. The process will be to explore the interplay

between Scripture, the *Book of Confessions*, and the *Book of Order*.⁹ This might be called a “constitutional approach to Presbyterian polity.” I have discovered as I followed this approach that the *Book of Order* has as its theme “Caring for the Body of Christ.” The places where the *Book of Order* is prescriptive are those places where the risk of harming brother and sister Presbyterian members of the body of Christ is high. Often the *Book of Order* appears to restrict choices when, in fact, the danger is more theological than about lack of compliance to a specific provision. The type of caring presented in the *Book of Order* is neither mushy nor emotional. There is a realism that illuminates the dark and difficult spaces of life together. The Historic Principles make it clear that the body of Christ has boundaries in as much as it is a human institution. To move beyond those limits is to live with a continuing challenge to “the ways things currently are.” However, Presbyterians tend to resist proposals for major shifts in doctrine or in order. Change occurs with deliberate speed.

I, in fact, discovered a disciplined spirituality as I worked on this project. Our Presbyterian polity may be approached from various perspectives. Some ask, “What does the *Book of Order* say we have to do about . . .?” Others wonder, “What can’t I do that I want to?” Still others ponder, “What are we (am I) supposed to be doing?” All these questions presuppose the sort of answer that will be found in study of the *Book of Order*. Perhaps the most challenging part of living with our polity lies in finding new ways of asking ourselves what it means to live in a community of disciples.

The challenge is how we can be good stewards of our heritage. In all the discussions about how much and in which direction the *Book of Order* should be amended or recast, there is surprisingly little discussion of how the Historic Principles of chapter 1 might provide guidance for understanding this collection of wisdom, which is the product of several centuries of experience. The Historic Principles can provide a helpful framework as we prepare to chart our course as Presbyterian Christians in the twenty-first century, a framework for new modes of obedience as together we move forward in the mission we have been given by Jesus Christ.

Note to reader: This book is designed to be a living document, reflecting the dynamic nature of Presbyterian polity. Wide margins have been provided for ease of note taking. This space can also be used to note changes in polity from GA overtures.

Notes

1. Paul M. Harrison, *Authority and Power in a Free Church Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1959), pp. 5–6. Harrison studied the American Baptist Convention, so his assessment is not limited to Presbyterian phenomena.
2. There is continuing discussion regarding how the Latin phrase should appear, as well as how it should be translated. William P. Thompson has suggested that since *reformanda* is a gerund, a more accurate translation would be, “the church reformed, but always being reformed.” Whether this discussion will lead to amending this provision is yet to be decided. (Personal communication)

3. These are not the oldest materials found in the *Book of Order*. However, they are early materials for American Presbyterians.
4. "Historic Principles, Conscience, and Church Government" (Louisville: Office of the General Assembly, 1983), p. 1. Available from Presbyterian Distribution Service as OGA-88-059 for \$4.00.
5. Guy S. Klett, ed., *Minutes of the Presbyterian Church in America: 1706–1788* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Historical Society, 1976), p. 597. Capitalization and punctuation reflects the manuscripts transcribed in this volume.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 636.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 638.
8. "Historic Principles," p. 1.
9. This approach is inherent in the ordination vows for ministers of the Word and Sacrament, elders, and deacons as outlined in G-14.0207 and G-14.0405b. The sequence of the vows, especially G-14.0207a–e and G-14.0405b(1)–(5) suggests that these are an integrated sequence, rather than separate and distinct vows without interrelation. The volume of information involved is intimidating, however, so the commitment housed within the vows is rarely fulfilled. The advent of the *Book of Confessions* on CD-ROM with word search capability (which has been used extensively in preparing this resource) makes it possible to fulfill G-14.0207c and G-14.0405b(3) (in particular, the last phrase, "will you be instructed and led by those confessions as you lead the people of God?"), with a facility undreamed of previously. We are now able to search out how a word or phrase has been used in our confessions, providing us with a bridge between Scripture texts and provisions in the *Book of Order*. This same word search ability with the *Book of Order* enables us to begin to grasp the import of this "library" and appreciate the nuances of meaning present in these resources.