



Polity Matters **by Charles Wiley**

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The Problem with Polity

I've heard a lot of snide remarks about Presbyterian polity lately. How we're just so stuck on our government that we can't get focused on Christ's call to the church. The reason I am so aware of this chatter is because many of those remarks came out of my own mouth. But I have not been alone—I have heard such descriptions from seminary leaders, pastors, elders, new worshipping community leaders, and even, if you can believe it, by those serving in the councils of our church. Our polity, for so long a point of particular pride, is often a punching bag, particularly within our own communion. This situation is not due to our lack of trying to adapt our polity to the new situations we are facing. After a thorough-going re-write of the *Form of Government*, a revised *Directory for Worship* is coming to the Assembly this summer. I find both of these documents faithful and encouraging. Nonetheless, the cracks about our polity keep coming.

These remarks often focus on specific practices of our polity in the various councils of the church, but they also concern the place of polity in our common life as Presbyterians. Even those of us who have a strong appreciation for the Presbyterian way feel trapped by our lived system of polity.

This essay frames an argument for why polity matters and how it can enliven the church in faithfulness to Jesus Christ. It is my attempt to talk about why polity matters.

How we got here

Our polity has been overly determinative for our identity. That is, we have become more known for our polity than for our theological and spiritual identity, a problem rooted in our history. You can ask any group of pastors and elders: "Why are we called Presbyterians?" Someone will answer quickly, "Because we're ruled by elders." That's the right answer, of course, and it gets to the affirmation of the parity of teaching and ruling elders that is important to us.

Nonetheless, it doesn't *really* answer the question. Many church traditions have elders in their leadership but don't call themselves *Presbyterians*. Many churches have presbyteries, or

something very much like them, but don't call themselves Presbyterian. Most Reformed churches around the world don't call themselves Presbyterians. We're called Presbyterians because at one point in our history the most significant ecclesial dispute was how the church was to be governed. The late Sixteenth and early Seventeenth centuries in England and Scotland were a time of revolution against the monarchy and vigorous, new debates about how people should be governed. This discussion on governance spanned both state and church. In political matters, some were monarchists, some favored governance through elected representatives, while others wanted a pure democracy. In a parallel discussion in the church, some people believed in government by bishops, others, government by elders, and still others, government by the people of the congregations. Hence, the birth of the Episcopalians, Presbyterians, and Congregationalists. Reformed Christians are known as Presbyterians only in England, Scotland, and in places where their descendants established churches.

In this formative period of our tradition, governance was the most important question. The legacy of our origin means we often lead with matters of polity to characterize identity. As a result, sometimes it feels as if our motto . . . our brand . . . our tagline is something like: "Presbyterians . . . we're the people who brought you . . . *presbyteries*." Now this may be true, and even good, but it is hardly a vision that will fuel decades of ministry.

What we need is to do is accentuate our theological and spiritual identity and then affirm our polity's role in serving as support to our primary mission.

Oversight in Theological Perspective

Grace Preceding

How is polity best understood theologically? In his new book, *Word and Church*, John Webster includes an essay that goes by the catchy title, "The Self-Organizing Power of the Gospel of Christ: Episcopacy and Community Formation." The question Webster raises is whether or not the ministry of oversight, the episcopacy, "can be considered an ordered, institutional implication of the gospel."¹ (p. 192)

Webster (following Dutch Roman Catholic theologian Edward Schillebeeckx) begins with a basic principle: any case for any order in the church must be measured "by the heart of the gospel message." (p. 192) Every question of order must be at least fitting for and at best necessary to "the life of a community at whose centre lies the gospel of Jesus Christ." (p. 192) Such a standard keeps us from falling into individualism on one side and clericalism on the other. The church continually struggles with authority being overly centralized or overly diffused, and a Gospel-centered polity avoids both by focusing on the Gospel instead of the form of the order.

When approaching questions of order and ministry, the church must be considered first, because church always precedes ministry in the logic of grace.² The church, and especially the form of the church, must flow out of the logic of grace. If it precedes the logic of grace, it will deform grace.

Why the church? “God is the one who manifests who he is in the economy of his saving work in which he assembles a people for Himself.” (p. 195) We must therefore draw a strong line between the being and act of God and the being and act of the church. We must always recognize that the church is a “creature of the Word of God,” an affirmation that underlines that the church is constituted by God, “realized through Word and Spirit.” (p. 195). The church is a human assembly begun and sustained by Jesus Christ.

At our best, we Presbyterians do recognize that the character of the church should emphasize the priority of grace, that grace precedes our human response. We enact this most profoundly in the baptism of children (although it is equally appropriate in the baptism of believers).

Little one, for you Jesus Christ came into the world:
for you he lived and showed God’s love;
for you he suffered the darkness of Calvary
and cried at the last, “It is accomplished”;
for you he triumphed over death and rose in newness of life;
for you he ascended to reign at God’s right hand.
All this he did for you, *little one*,
though you do not know it yet.
And so the word of Scripture is fulfilled:
“We love because God loved us first.”³

Gratitude Responding

In response to this grace freely offered to us, our only response is gratitude. Gratitude for our lives, for our treasure, for our community. Gratitude that compels us to share the love of Christ in the community and to do justice and love mercy for all God’s children. Gratitude is not fundamentally an inner feeling, it is the shape of life together following Jesus in thankfulness for God’s prior claim upon our lives.

This deep commitment to the priority of grace shapes our ecclesiology, always insisting in the asymmetry of divine and human action in the church (p. 196). We maintain this distinction, not because it is easy to see in practice, but as a spiritual discipline that helps keep us in right relation to God. That we do this does not undercut the earthly visibility of the church, because the earthly, visible church is all we have access to. The church through which God saves is this human gathering, this visible church, constituted by Christ and animated by the Spirit.

And because this church is a human gathering, a human society, it must be ordered. Without some kind of order, there is only chaos. This order does not constitute the church, but it does help sustain it as a human institution. This order cannot be confused with what constitutes it, nor can it be dispensed with as if order were irrelevant to a spiritual entity.

Webster concludes that a properly Reformed ecclesiology always emphasizes Christ’s act of constituting the church through the animating power of the Holy Spirit, which relativizes (but doesn’t erase) the activity of the church in its ordered ministry (p. 198). It is from this basis that we can look at the role of polity and oversight. When Christ ascends, the direct oversight of the church is transferred from Jesus’ earthly presence to human beings entrusted with church

leadership. That is, the Presbyterian ordering of elders (teaching and ruling) to oversee ministry in the church is totally appropriate, but this ministry must always be practiced as following Christ's pattern for ministry, that is, never standing in for Christ but following Christ's pattern of dependence on the Holy Spirit. We must be vigilant that we not stand in the place of Christ. To put it more sharply, our ministry is faithful insofar as it constantly points to Christ as the true minister. We do not complete Christ's ministry or accomplish what Christ was unable to accomplish—we point to Christ's ongoing ministry, serving faithfully in what Christ calls us. (p. 201-2)

The ministry of oversight is necessary in order to call the church, over and over again, to this fundamental ministry—that the church is to point to the ongoing ministry of Jesus Christ. The church is a human, and thus political society, and requires ordering to keep it faithful to its fundamental mission. Oversight challenges the church to keep faithful to the Gospel.

Presbyterian Polity: Practicing Gratitude?

You have probably noticed that in my exploration into the gospel orientation of oversight, I have minimized references to the particular presbyterian exercise of that oversight. That is intentional. I do not share our Scottish forebears' confidence that presbyterian polity is read right off the pages of the New Testament and is therefore the only completely faithful way to order a church. There are faithful ways to practice episcopal and congregational visions of oversight, now with countless variations in the global church. And if one looks at the actual practices of Presbyterian, Methodist, Lutheran, Episcopal, and even Roman Catholic churches in the United States, there are more similarities than there are differences. Nonetheless, I do believe there are some basic instincts of presbyterian polity that are faithful, good, and can be a gift to the church ecumenical.

If we take our theological foundation as a starting point, where gratitude is the shape of the Christian life in response to a God of grace, then the question is what does gratitude look like in the context of our life together in the political society of the church? In the context of polity, gratitude looks like shared oversight.

Why do we organize ourselves in councils? We recognize that all Christians are claimed by God and are in the process of sanctification, and at the same time are both fallible and sinful. Thus in oversight we want to encourage many voices, that we might hear the wisdom that comes from the Spirit through one another and so that our sinful instincts might be overcome through mutual discernment.

Presbyterian polity is also a way to practice a core Reformed theological claim: "God is God and we are not." When individuals are put in the position of pastor, of minister, it is easy for the pastor and the person in the pew to view the pastor as somehow God-like, standing in the place of Christ. That's why inconvenient practices like the one that requires a ruling elder to be part of every communion service (and, in effect, prohibit pastors from serving communion all on their own) are so important—that practice is an affirmation that pastors are not sufficient to represent the church. This practice of oversight focuses us on witness to Christ. If this is practiced only as a rule, the witness is lost.

There are many ways to practice this vision of Presbyterian polity. This is becoming more evident as we find more and more new immigrant fellowships and congregations in the PC(USA) and we see how these general impulses get lived out in many ways. Whatever specific practices of shared oversight we may find, the primary question is whether these practices encourage us to be a gospel-centered community.

How the Relatively new Form of Government sets the Course

As I noted in the opening of this essay, I would not be honest if I communicated that I am a lonely figure in the PC(USA). You could say that this essay is a meditation on the (No-Longer-New) Form of Government. The “Foundations of Presbyterian Polity” does not begin with structure, but with an affirmation of God’s mission to the world and the call of Christ to the church to be marked by this mission:

The good news of the Gospel is that the triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—creates, redeems, sustains, rules, and transforms all things and all people. This one living God, the Scriptures say, liberated the people of Israel from oppression and covenanted to be their God. By the power of the Spirit, this one living God is incarnate in Jesus Christ, who came to live in the world, die for the world, and be raised again to new life. The Gospel of Jesus Christ announces the nearness of God’s kingdom, bringing good news to all who are impoverished, sight to all who are blind, freedom to all who are oppressed, and proclaiming the Lord’s favor upon all creation. (F-1.01)

Nonetheless, we must proclaim this message over and over again. My concern is that contraction and fear are blinding us to the gains we may have made in articulating our polity. And, frankly, the continued constant tinkering with the Form Of Government strikes me as a counter-witness to the space it could allow us. From what I can tell, the Assembly has voted to amend the constitution at every opportunity since Reunion. Such a focus on the minutiae of polity obscures its overall, salutary function.

Five Arenas Where this Approach to Polity is Vital

If the problem is our practice of our polity, I see five areas where a move to a more gospel-oriented polity could have dramatic effects: the congregation, the presbytery, the presbytery particularly as it engages New Worshiping Communities, the ordination process, and the General Assembly.

Congregations: one especially profound passage in the (No-Longer-New) Form of Government is: “The congregation is the basic form of the church, but it is not of itself a sufficient form of the church.” (G-1.0101) While our polity in the past has highlighted the presbytery over the congregation, we now put the emphasis in exactly the right place: the body gathered by God around Word and Sacrament, fed by Christ, and sent by the Spirit. The session, moderated by the pastor, is the council whose oversight of the congregation must be gospel-centered. Many congregations and New Worshiping communities are finding life in this kind of orientation. At the same time, we have many congregations who are saddled by nostalgia for what used to be and anxiously focused on their buildings that are more maintenance-inducing than mission-

generating. Every session would benefit from periodically stepping back and asking if their oversight of the congregation enables the congregation to point to Christ.

Presbyteries: In many ways, presbyteries are the most pressure-prone part of our system. In the past twenty years we have gone from programmatic, staff-heavy presbyteries to councils with low budgets, many without any full-time staff, and a completely different understanding of what the presbytery's mission is. And many presbyteries are taking this new reality as a mandate to re-dedicate themselves to a gospel-oriented vision of oversight. Yet others are focused on survival and/or control of the congregations in their bounds. We must seize this moment for all of our presbyteries to orient themselves radically for the future, becoming catalysts for God's mission to the world. My instinct is that a simple test would be a word-association exercise on the ministry of the presbytery. If *gracious* isn't in the top two or three words, self-examination is in order.

Presbyteries in relation to New Worshiping Communities: I've heard story after story of how presbyteries have embraced the new movement of establishing new worshiping communities, working actively to make the paths straight for this life-giving movement (life-giving for the new communities but also for existing congregations). At the same time, there are still too many stories of presbyteries that are more interested in controlling new worshiping communities than they are in seeing what God might do through them. Exercising gospel-oriented oversight in relation to New Worshiping Communities may soon become the most important activity of most of our presbyteries.

Ordination Process: All levels of our polity are involved in the ordination process for Teaching Elders. We all know that often this process is experienced, by all involved, as *hoop jumping*. What would it look like if we could conceive of the ordination process as a witness to Christ, rather than a series of requirements that must be endured? I can easily make a case that the requirements of Greek and Hebrew make sense as a gospel requirement because we believe that facility with the original languages of the texts helps those who preach and teach to do so with fidelity to the Gospel. I fear that we sometimes admit to the ministry of word and sacrament those who can endure the process the best rather than those whose gifts are identified by the church for this ministry, guiding others to the ministries that best fit their gifts and the church's needs. A process that was itself a witness to the Gospel would, I believe, be more strict *and* more joyous for all involved. It would require "gracious no's" and "gracious yes's" along the process.

General Assembly: One need only read the list of overtures coming to the 222nd General Assembly (2016) to see that there is a lot of concern that the General Assembly no longer serves the function that the highest court in our system should. I have heard this complaint from many conservatives, but also from many card-carrying liberals (you should get one to show you their card sometime). There are many proposals on the table for changing the character of the Assembly. Let me emphasize one proposal: I am proud that the PC(USA) finds itself hip deep in the political and justice issues of the day. But please let us first address how we might embody a Christ-like response to these issues before we move to telling others how to behave. An authentic, embodied witness is not only more honest. I am convinced it will be more fruitful in the long run. Embodied social witness can be a hallmark of gratitude as the orientation of our common life.

In every arena, a good polity can be abused to push agendas and shut down engagement with the issues at hand. Polity at its best structures our interactions so that we can solve problems in a way that honors our Lord.

Polity Matters

Polity matters. Our polity becomes a problem when it takes too central a place in our identity by becoming an end in itself. When this happens, control and bureaucracy trump community and mission. But when oversight is practiced with a gospel orientation, it can be a faithful means by which God leads us.

Why are we called Presbyterians? Because we order ourselves so we can more visibly and vitally point to the gospel of Christ. Polity matters because it can be a means by which we keep ourselves open to the Spirit and accountable to the Gospel. In this secondary, mission-shaped role, polity can be a source of life for us as we follow Christ, engaged in God's mission, and enlivened by the Spirit.

Endnotes

¹ John Webster, *Word and Church: Essays in Christian Dogmatics* 2nd edition, Cornerstones Series (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016). Pages numbers will be given in the text.

² Webster cites Paul Avis, *The Church in the Theology of the Reformers* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1981), p. 111. See Webster, *Word and Church*, p. 195.

³ Church of Scotland, *Book of Common Order of the Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1996), pp. 89-90.

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“Polity Matters”

Conversation Starters: Discussion Questions

By Barry Ensign-George

1. What do you appreciate about the polity of this denomination? What are some of the ways our Presbyterian polity becomes problematic, even for those who strongly appreciate it?
 2. What other denominations and congregations have elders? What other denominations and congregations have councils or committees that gather to make decisions for the whole?
 3. When we’re thinking about polity, why is it important to start with God and God’s grace?
 4. How does our understanding of the things the church does change when we think of those things as embodiments of gratitude to God? How does that thought change our view of one another – those with whom we are joined together in our polity?
 5. What are some ways our polity “focuses us on witness to Christ” (p. 4)?
 6. How can you (and a council of the church of which you are a part) step back and ask if your service in your congregation (or presbytery) helps your congregation (presbytery) point to Christ (p. 6)? What do you see when you take that step back?
 7. Wiley proposes five areas of the life of our denomination in which a focus on God’s grace in Jesus Christ could reshape how we live that aspect of our life together. Which of these do you find compelling? Why?
 8. What idea or insight in this paper most energizes you for ministry in our Presbyterian way? What idea or insight brings you a sense of peace?
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