Historic Principles, Conscience and Church Government

Adopted by
195th General Assembly (1983)
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

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REPORT OF THE SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON HISTORIC PRINCIPLES, CONSCIENCE, AND CHURCH GOVERNMENT

The 194th General Assembly (1982) of The United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America concurred with *Overture 78* (1982) from the Presbytery of Chicago, which requested "a solemn interpretation . . . of the Preliminary Principles . . . Form of Government, Chapter I, Sections 1-8 (31.01-.08), and of [the Radical Principles, Form of Government,] Chapter V, Section 1 (35.01), and of their relationship to each other, and of their relationship to the process of amending our Constitution." (*Minutes,* 1982, Part I, p. 518.)

The Assembly instructed its Moderator to appoint a special committee to recommend the interpretation which the presbytery requested. The Moderator subsequently appointed this special committee composed of the following persons: Howard L. Rice, San Anselmo, California, Chairperson, John T. Ames, Anchorage, Kentucky, Alfred T. Goodwin, Portland, Oregon, James McClure, Oak Park, Illinois, Patricia McClurg, Atlanta, Georgia, Leroy Patrick, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Annette L. Phinazee, Durham, North Carolina, John J. Spangler, Atlanta, Georgia, and Marianne L. Wolfe, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

The committee has met on three occasions and submits the following report.

Introduction

The Synod of New York and Philadelphia at its last meeting in 1788 adopted a "Form of Government and Discipline" which, with many changes, has governed American Presbyterianism since that time. The famous "Introduction" to this new constitution quoted the Westminster Confession of Faith, that "God alone is lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in any thing contrary to his Word . . . ." (6.109.)

These "Preliminary Principles" (Form of Government, United Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., Chapter I, 31.00 - 31.08) now in the Reunited Church called "The Historic Principles of Church Order" (G. 1.0300 - 1.0308) affirm in the strongest terms both the right and the responsibility of individuals to formulate their own faith as they feel led by the Word and Spirit of God; and also the freedom of the church to order its life and proclaim its faith according to its understanding of God's will. The Presbyterian Church in the United States also affirmed "freedom of conscience" in its *Book of Church Order* (14-3).

Yet the church has in many ways mandated certain actions and forbade others on the part of church officers and governing bodies. Both the Presbyterian Church in the United States and The United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America antecedent denominations from which our church was formed made many affirmations and took positions on many matters with which some members and officers in good conscience could not agree. It is perhaps fair to say that no knowledgeable member or officer of the church can agree with every requirement or prohibition of the "Form of Government" and with every position which the church takes on every issue. This has, not surprisingly, led to tension in the church; yet it has also contributed to a healthy diversity of opinion, to growth and change in many areas, and to the search for creative solutions to areas of conflict.

The committee would call attention to the report of the Committee on Pluralism which was received by the 190th General Assembly, UnitedPresbyterian Church in the U.S.A., in 1978 and the report of the Task Force on Polity and Reconciliation appointed as a result of the action and received by the 191st General Assembly, United Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., in 1979. Here the General Assembly affirmed both the existence and the desirability of diversity in the church; recognizing that controversy, and the tension inevitably produced by diversity, may be the arena where—in the struggle and grappling with ideas—the Spirit is most likely to speak to the church.

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.

We are very inclined to the fallacy that trouble in the church is unique to a particular time and to a particular situation. This can lead to the erroneous conviction that if we only were faithful enough or smart enough or tried hard enough, we could solve the church's problems. The experiences of the apostle Paul in his own ministry are clear testimony that the questions addressed by this committee are not uniquely Presbyterian nor are they twentieth century. Paul lists "party spirit" as among the "desires of the flesh" (Gal. 5:20) contrasting the existence of "party spirit" in the church with the presence of "the Spirit" in an interesting play on words. To the Corinthians and others he emphasized the necessity of unity in the church with an affirmation of the inevitability and desirability of diversity; yet to all he said, "You are the body of Christ." (I Cor. 12:27.)

One of the earliest controversies in the apostolic church was the occasion for the convocation of the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15). Peter recounts a vision of the diversity of God's people (Acts 11) and a divine admonition to the young church to allow diversity in its fellowship, and Peter and Paul had already agreed on this very sensitive matter (Gal. 2: 1-10). At the council Peter rose to Paul's defense, and the council made the decision to permit Paul to carry out his

* Directions for the Future I, "channeling the church's energies in witness in the whole life and into the whole world," the first of five "Directions for the Future to Strengthen the Life and Work of the United Presbyterian Church," adopted by the General Assembly Mission Council at its regular meeting, November 11-13, 1982.

ministry among the gentiles. There is the impression, based on Paul's letter to the Galatians, that he would have done so in any case, causing a destructive and perhaps fatal division in the young church.

The subsequent history of the church—in all its branches—is a story of conflict and compromise. Sometimes the conflict has been destructive. Christians must continually live in the tension that occasionally exists between the truth, unity and purity of the church. We pray for guidance, recognizing that "synods and councils may err"; but recognizing the assumption of our polity that governing bodies which conduct their business in accordance with the procedures of our form of government—guaranteeing the rights of every member—are more likely to reflect God's will for the church than individuals acting in their private capacity or as members of ad hoc, self-appointed groups.

I. The Historical Context

A. *Background*

For the first eighty-two years of its existence, American Presbyterianism got along with no explicit, written form of government. The Adopting Act of 1729 had made the Westminster Confession of Faith "in all the essential and necessary Articles" the creedal basis of the church, but the "Directory of Worship and Form of Government" adopted by the Westminster divines was simply declared to be "agreeable in substance to the Word of God" and was "earnestly recommended" to the congregations and ministers of the synod "as near as Circumstances will allow and Christian prudence direct."[1] Thus there was no objective authority to which parties in controversy could appeal, and no authority higher than the majority vote of a given synod.

The Westminster "Form of Government" is not really a form of government. The Assembly was dominated by the Presbyterian wing of Puritanism, but not all of them were willing to adopt the full Presbyterian system of the Church of Scotland. There were some members who favored a modified episcopacy, a group of radical Independents whose influence greatly exceeded their numbers, and a very significant body of Erastians who believed that a Christian state should dominate and control the church. There were also eight "Scotch Commissioners" whose presence was part of the price that was exacted for help that the Scots army rendered to the Parliamentary cause. The Assembly first passed a series of "Propositions of Church Government" establishing the full principle of Presbyterianism but these propositions were rejected by Parliament. They were adopted by the Church of Scotland, however, in 1645, and formed the basis for the polity of that church. Following this parliamentary rebuff, and in the face of the protests of the Independents and the determined Erastian Parliament, the Assembly adopted and recommended "A Practical Directory for Church Government" which avoided as much as possible all questions of principle. It was a much modified Presbyterian system with presbyteries and synods but no general assembly, no lay elders, and a church clearly dominated, even in purely ecclesiastical matters, by the civil authorities. It was approved by Parliament, but never by the Church of Scotland. This directory governed the Puritan dominated Church of England during the Interregnum and the nonconformist churches in England after 1688.

American Presbyterians from the beginning thus inherited two quite different traditions of church government from Great Britain. These were augmented by adherents of continental Reformed Churches, especially Dutch and German along with some French Huguenots. Throughout the colonial period when there was no written form of government, the differences between these various traditions were never resolved.

Subscription to the Westminster theological standards itself had been bitterly controversial. In 1729 Jonathan Dickinson of New York proposed a solution which made a distinction between essential and non-essential articles in the theological standards. Candidates for ordination were to be required to subscribe only to the "essential articles" and the presbytery was given the responsibility of judging as to whether an individual's "scruple" was on an essential article or not. The Adopting Act of 1729 further pledged that the members of Synod "solemnly agree, that none of us will traduce or use any opprobrious terms of those that differ from us in these extra-essential and not necessary points of doctrine . . ."[2] Dickinson's solution to this problem was not what would today be called a compromise, but was rather an entirely new construct. The tension between the differing points of view was retained, and the extremists of neither side were satisfied, but the unity of the church was maintained.

The tension erupted again during the Great Awakening when presbyteries dominated by the revival party ordained Log College graduates who were less interested in rigid adherence to the Westminster theology than in an experience of grace. For their part, the "New Side" leaders charged the more orthodox group—which dominated the synod after about 1736—with being more interested in theological orthodoxy than in either Christian experiences or the personal morality of candidates for ordination.

In 1741 the "Old Side" forced William Tennent and the other Log College leaders of New Brunswick Presbytery out of the Synod. This was protested by the Presbytery of New York, of which Dickinson was the main representative. The Dickinson group was not a product of the revival, and was not necessarily even sympathetic to it. It was, however, bitterly opposed to the high-handed manner in which the Synod majority had dealt with the revival party, and with the assumption of such authority by the Synod over the presbyteries. For two years Dickinson and others tried to effect a reconciliation. That proving to be impossible, the Presbytery of New York joined the

Log College group and the Synod of New York was formed in 1744.

Since the "New Side" Synod was diverse from the beginning, it was necessary that some techniques for accommodating differences be developed. Dickinson and Tennent were different in many ways, but they both insisted that it was the presbytery—not the higher judicatory—which was the fundamental unit of Presbyterian organization. This contrasts with the situation in Scotland where the General Assembly, originally created by act of Parliament, was the basic unit of the church's organization.

The reunion of 1758 established the basic pattern of government under which American Presbyterianism has continued to operate. It was similar in many ways to the arrangement by which the Synod of New York had come into being. This reunion was essentially a compromise between the stricter Presbyterianism of Scotland and Ireland, which the "Old Side" Synod of Philadelphia represented, and a version of Presbyterianism much influenced by elements of Congregationalism brought by New Englanders and strongly reinforced by the Great Awakening.

The reunion reveals the Presbyterian genius for compromise on matters of polity (and to some extent theology). It was achieved on the basis of the Adopting Act of 1729 and most of the other areas which had been in dispute were compromised. The "Plan of Union" included a provision for dealing with conscientious minorities:

> When any Matter is determined by a Major Vote, every Member Shall either actively concur with, or passively Submit to Such Determination; or, if his Conscience permit him to do neither, he Shall, after Sufficient Liberty modestly to reason and remonstrate, peaceably withdraw from our Communion, without attempting to make any Schism: Provided always, that this Shall be understood to extend only to Such Determinations, as the Body Shall judge indispensable in Doctrine or Presbyterian Government.[3]

After the War of Independence the rapid growth of the church made it evident that the government of the Presbyterian Church was in need of improvement. The decision to abandon the increasingly inefficient nondelegated general Synod and create a General Assembly and the decision to adopt a written form of government were made about the same time, but are only coincidentally related to each other.[4] In 1785 the Synod faced the problem of increasingly poor attendance at its meetings. One of the recommendations was that it be made into a delegated Synod, which should be mostly advisory or consultative, and that much greater power should be assumed by the presbyteries. This was proposed by the New England dominated Presbytery of Suffolk (which then sought to withdraw from the synod when its suggestion was not adopted); but the Synod instead adopted a resolution proposing that "three or more" synods be created.[5]

Two days later the Synod appointed a committee to draw up an American compilation of Presbyterian discipline. It instructed the committee to look to the practice of the Church of Scotland ("and other British Protestant Churches") and "agreeably to the general principles of Presbyterian government" to compile rules "for the government of Synod and the several Presbyteries."[6] The Synod specifically recognized that the Westminster "Form of Government" was inadequate to regulate the day to day affairs of the church. It instructed the committee to consider, in addition, "Pardovan's Collections" which was a compilation of precedents, procedures, and rules in the Church of Scotland going back to the Reformation. It had been compiled by Walter Steuart, Earl of Pardovan, and revised and updated by others.

The committee was chaired by John Witherspoon, a Scotsman who had been chosen president of the College of New Jersey in 1766 partially because he was neutral in the continuing squabbles between the "New Side" and the "Old Side." Witherspoon was an able theologian, administrator and fund raiser; and his conspicuous patriotism in the days of the Continental Congress had brought popular esteem both to him and his church. His usefulness to the church continued to be, however, his political astuteness. He was personally quite orthodox and took a fairly "high church" position on matters of polity; but politically he was allied in the church with the free church leaders from the "New Side" tradition who had brought him to Princeton. His influence on the committee and in the synod was definitely in the direction of emulating the Scottish model of church government.

The committee also included John Rodgers, minister of the First Presbyterian Church of New York City. Rodgers was the product of the revival, and definitely "New Side" in his political and theological sentiments; but he was also what might be called "high church" in both liturgical matters and polity. Among his many other contributions to the infant church, for example, was the first draft of the "Directory of Worship"—a genuine liturgy which was rendered innocuous before being adopted by the General Assembly in 1788. Rodgers was the most conscientious member of the committee, and the only one to attend every meeting. It is likely that he was responsible for the actual drafting of the "Form of Government," though Ashbel Green, the first historian of American Presbyterianism and biographer of John Witherspoon, asserted, over fifty years later, that Witherspoon was the main author of the "Historic Principles."[7]

Francis Alison, minister of the First Church in Philadelphia and patriarch of the "Old Side," was on the committee, as was Matthew Wilson, the defiantly anti-Scottish moderator of the Synod in 1785. Wilson's annotated version of the final draft of the "Form of Government" is deposited in the Presbyterian Historical Society in Philadelphia and gives vivid evidence of the extent to which the church was divided on the basic questions of polity.

There is evidently a certain degree of correlation between ethnic origin and the theological-political division in the church. Many of the ministers who had recently immigrated from Ulster and from Scotland tended to side with the more rigidly Presbyterian party, whereas most of those who favored a greater

laxity in both theology and polity were of New England birth or education.[8] It is also a matter of fact that protagonists in the controversy not infrequently described their opponents in ethnic terms. Wilson's colorful comments illustrate this. Beside a phrase in the "Preliminary Principles" which refers to the government of the Church, "which Christ hath appointed," he wrote: "Has Christ appointed these laws? Are they not stolen from the Kirk of Scotland?" One must be careful, however, not to make too much of these ethnic differences and identifications. Many of those who had been influenced by the revival, for example, who favored loose subscription and a more relaxed polity, were Scots or "Scotch-Irish." The government of American Presbyterianism was neither that of Scottish (and Irish) Presbyterianism (as some wished), nor was it a slight adaptation of New England Puritanism (as others wished). It was a new thing, hammered out of controversy and compromise, and adopted when the majority of the church—composed of persons of all ethnic and geographic backgrounds—determined that agreement on principles and compromise on details was necessary if the unity of the church was to be preserved, and if the church was to be enabled to meet the challenge which it faced in a new, rapidly growing, frontier nation.

B. *"The Historic Principles"*

The original "Form of Government" was clearly a compromise between those in the church who wanted to adopt the full discipline and government of the Church of Scotland and those who preferred a much "looser" and less rigidly Presbyterian system. At the Synod of 1785, Matthew Wilson proposed the adoption of a plan of government which he had prepared. Unfortunately it was not entered on the *Minutes*, and no copy of it appears to have survived. Wilson's opponents, whom he describes as "the Scottish Gentry," then proposed that the Synod adopt the full discipline of the Church of Scotland.[9] The Synod rejected both alternatives and reorganized the committee, which presented the first draft of the "Form of Government" the following year.

The "Preface" to the new plan thus describes the nature of the compromise which it represents. These statements became Chapter I of the "Form of Government" in the edition of 1821, where they were, for the first time, called "Preliminary Principles." They appeared in every subsequent edition of the "Form of Government" of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America and The United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America. The footnote in the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) first appeared as a footnote in the 1821 edition. Clearly these principles are intended to mollify those in the church who were opposed to all or much of the proposed new "Form of Government." This was done in two specific ways: by the firm declaration of the liberty of the individual conscience, and by the firm declaration that the church had no aspirations to the "national church" position then claimed by the Church of Scotland. The most significant opposition to the "Form of Government" seems to have existed on the part of those who favored a greater degree of theological latitude and local autonomy than the majority. They also feared (1) a delegated General Assembly, (2) a written form of government giving considerable and specific powers to the higher governing bodies, and (3) a polity which seemed to resemble the state Church of Scotland more than the free churches elsewhere in Great Britain.

These opponents were assured by the introduction to the "Form of Government" that the church claimed no authority over their private consciences which were "free from the doctrines and commandments of men."

The other major focus of the "Preliminary Principles" is the freedom and independence of the church. This strikes us today as a rather noncontroversial matter, but those who adhered to the more "high church" party aspired to the sort of church-society arrangement (if not state church) that existed in Scotland. It is also likely that the "Preliminary Principles" were intended to differentiate the Presbyterian Church from other denominations. The statements make it clear that the Presbyterians claimed the liberty to order their affairs as they thought best, but were determined that others who had different opinions had the same right. The principle of church-state separation was very new in America in 1788; and was opposed by many. Presbyterians had been conspicuous among those who favored this principle, and were perhaps proud to take this opportunity to do so.

The Synod which adopted the "Form of Government" did not do so unanimously. Overtures were received from several congregations objecting to various provisions, but they were tabled. The irascible Matthew Wilson was ill, but sent a long protest which was ignored.[10] Suffolk Presbytery on Long Island had so strenuously objected to the first draft that it requested to be separated from the Synod. The following year Suffolk Presbytery was reconciled to the adoption of the "Form of Government." Controversy continued, of course, but as far as can be determined no minister or congregation left the denomination in protest to the adoption of the constitution.

The action of 1788 was to adopt a written constitution for the church consisting of a general system of Presbyterian doctrine, government, worship, and discipline. As the Adopting Act of 1729 and the union of 1758 had not required rigid conformity either in doctrine or polity, so the new constitution permitted considerable diversity under adherence to a general system. The Adopting Act proclaimed that American Presbyterianism was not to be as rigidly confessional as the 17th and 18th century Church of Scotland; the introduction to the "Form of Government" made the same point about the church's polity. The right of private conscience was to be preserved so that there could be room for differences within the church over matters of both doctrine and procedure that were not deemed essential.

II. The Relationship Between Polity and Biblical Theology in Presbyterianism

> The notes of the true Kirk, therefore, we believe, confess, and avow to be; first, the true preaching of the Word of God, in which God has revealed himself to us, as the writing of the prophets and apostles declare; secondly, the right administration of the sacraments of Christ Jesus, with which must be associated the Word and promise of God to seal and confirm them in our hearts; and lastly, ecclesiastical discipline uprightly ministered, as God's Word prescribes, whereby vice is repressed and virtue nourished.
>
> (Scots Confession, Chapter XXVIII)
> (*Book of Confessions, 3.18)

The basis of Presbyterian polity is theological. Our polity is not just a convenient way of getting things done; it is rather, the ordering of our corporate life which expresses what we believe. The connection between faith and order is inseparable. At its heart, the polity of the church expresses our Reformed theology. What we do and the way we do it is an expression of how we understand our faith.

The Scots' Confession makes this clear when it speaks about the marks of the true church, those qualities which enable us to identify the church. These marks have to do with both purity of doctrine and proper procedure. The two are interrelated for what is true must also be expressed in the way things are done. Thus the right administration of the sacraments has to do both with the proper understanding of them and with the way in which they are done, and the exercise of discipline is a matter of procedure.

Central to this relationship between faith and practice is our conviction that Scripture is central to all the church does. The shape of the life of the church, that is its polity, is a direct expression of what we believe the Bible teaches. This is not to say that Presbyterianism is expressly taught in Scripture; and certainly not to say that other forms of church order, reflecting the understanding of others of God's people, are inimical to Scripture. We do affirm, however, that we believe that our polity is biblical in that it expresses our deepest insights from Scripture about the relationship between God and the people of God.

A. *The Covenant*

It is from Scripture that a central theme of the polity of the Church is derived: That of the covenantal nature of God's dealing with humankind from the beginning. God chose a people and bound them in a covenant community. For us, that covenant community is the church which Paul describes in I Corinthians 12 as the body of Christ. Each member is called to a particular ministry according to gifts and abilities as a part of the one ministry of the covenant community. Every member is called to minister in the world. Some are called to minister within the church as its officers. It is indispensable that each member of the covenant community have a sense of inner persuasion and be sound in faith, but a purely private relation with God is necessarily incomplete. Individuals are in relationship to God through their participation and membership in the covenant community to which they are called both in a private and a public call. The two sacraments, Baptism and the Lord's Supper, bind the community of faith together and are to be administered in the presence of the community by those charged by the community with this responsibility.

The emphasis upon the covenant is also the basis for the vesting of authority in representative assemblies now called governing bodies. The covenant between God and the church is expressed by the corporate bodies far more effectively than by any individual. The debate of issues within these bodies is more likely to discern and express the will of God than is any private decision made by an individual. The more representative the body (the more inclusive) the more likely it will be able to express God's will.

God's covenant is made with all who are bound together in Christ. This universal church is greater than the sum of its parts. Presbyterians have always affirmed that every particular denomination is but a part of this great church catholic, and must recognize members of all other branches of the church as our sisters and brothers. This leads Presbyterians to ecumenical activity, and has done so from the beginning.

This understanding also means that Presbyterians are suspicious of particular congregations as sufficient expressions of the covenant. No single congregation can stand by itself. It is not complete as a microcosm of the whole church, for any congregation is inevitably too homogeneous and therefore too parochial to be a full expression of God's covenant with the church. Our polity affirms that it is the more inclusive governing bodies which are more truly representative of the diversity of God's covenant people. Thus they are more likely to reflect accurately the church's understanding of God's will than are the less inclusive and inevitably more parochial governing bodies of the church.

B. *Human Sin*

Another theological principle which lies at the root of Presbyterian polity is also derived from Scripture. It is the clear understanding that all are sinners. Any individual entrusted with very much power may well misuse that power. Individuals may only represent the governing bodies of the church in order to carry out the instructions or directions of the body which empowered them to speak or act, and they are always responsible to the church body they represent.

Our emphasis on principles tends to differentiate Presbyterians from those in other Christian communions. Presbyterians find the locus of the church neither in the local congregation, as in a congregational polity, nor in a hierarchy of authoritative individuals, as in episcopal polity. Presbyterians believe, of course, that God calls individuals to faith; but we believe that the corporate life of the church is best expressed by our system of representative govern-

* Citations are to the Book of Confessions of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

ing bodies in which ordained officers act on behalf of the church.

No individual in our system holds any authority in the church except by the call of the church. The officers of a governing body are temporary and limited. The only two required offices are those of a moderator and a clerk and these titles suggest modesty about function. Both offices are called by the particular function: Someone must preside over the proceedings and someone must keep adequate records. Apart from the electing body, neither of these two officers has power. Any other person holding authority in the church, such as Presbytery, Synod, or General Assembly staff persons, is likewise limited in function and completely dependent upon the particular governing body for authority.

It is out of the suspicion of probable misuse of power that pastors are limited in their authority. The right of the people to elect their officers, including pastors, is in itself a safeguard against their abuse of power.

C. *Sovereignty of God*

A third biblical emphasis behind Presbyterian polity is the insistence that God has to do with all of life. There is no way by which the temporal and spiritual can be neatly divided. The church must seek God's will for the whole of life in society. The spiritual welfare of the church involves its total obedience to God's will and is expressed by faithfulness in all that it does.

All the governing bodies of the church are obligated to consider and act upon proper understanding of how each is to express God's will in the whole of life. Each governing body, therefore, may need to deal with issues which are complex and difficult. Seeking shortcuts or easy answers to difficult questions is not being faithful. In every age, there are questions and issues which must be addressed in the effort to be responsible to God. Sometimes the issues will have to do with the internal life of the church and at other times they will have to do with the relationship between the church and society at large. In both instances, avoidance of conflict is not being responsible or faithful.

D. *Implications*

Presbyterian polity thus reflects our understanding of the church as the covenant people of God, as sinful people forgiven by God's grace, and as a people called by God to be an integral part of the body of Jesus Christ in the world.

Presbyterianism, with its insistence on individual responsibility and its tradition of educated leadership, has always known controversy, conflict and rigorous dissent. Conflict is often the result of different perspectives which people have and these differences may be important. Agreement may not necessarily be a sign of faithfulness, but may instead be a sign that we do not care very deeply about the particular issue. The more we care, the more likely it is that we may disagree.

The people of God in Scripture are often engaged in conflict. There is no such thing as a biblical picture of serenity as the reality of God's covenant people. The three different values which must always be before us—peace, purity, and unity—will always be in tension. Those who seek a church free of conflict are seeking something that cannot be had in this world except at the price of disobedience, avoidance of difficult issues, or subservience to the will of a few. The diversity of the church is its strongest asset in seeking to discover God's will and that diversity will be expressed in very different opinions.

This biblical perspective on God's will for the church means that Presbyterians are willing to be uncomfortable, uneasy, disturbed, as these experiences are required. If God's will could be neatly circumscribed or limited to "religious" questions, it might be somewhat easier to achieve a kind of peace within the church. Because God's will is so all encompassing, however, the church is thrust into questions which are confusing, about which there is no absolute clarity, and over which there will be heated differences.

Spiritual questions have to do with all of life, and spiritual solutions will never come without conflict. Unity is not something which can be had at the price of forced consensus or avoidance. Our unity is best expressed by our continued willingness to hang in when the going is tough.

III. The Historic Principles of Presbyterianism

A. *Preliminary Principles*

The first group of these Principles came to be known as The Preliminary Principles.

The Historic Principles of Presbyterianism are the explication of what Presbyterians believe. They are the working out of our understanding of the nature of the church in the actual life of the church. When the Synod of New York and Philadelphia adopted these principles as a Preface to the "Form of Government" in 1788, the church was acting in response to a particular conflict about the definition of diversity within the church and of the various churches within the larger society. The principles were written to describe the particular identity of Presbyterians and how that identity shapes the distinctive life of the church, holding in tension the need for diversity and the requirement for centrality of purpose and commonality of belief. The introductory paragraph sets the tone for what follows:

> The United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, in presenting to the Christian public the system of union and the form of government and discipline which they have adopted, have thought proper to state, by way of introduction, a few of the general principles by which they have been governed in the formation of the plan. This, it is hoped, will in some measure prevent those rash misconstructions, and uncandid reflections, which usually proceed from an imperfect view of any subject; as well as make the several parts of the system plain, and the whole perspicuous and fully understood. (Form of Government, UPCUSA, Chapter I, first paragraph (31.00).)

As in 1788, so today, the church is called upon to deal with diversity both within itself and within the culture beyond itself. Now as then, there are persons who wish that the church were more explicit about matters of faith and practice so that it might have clearer identity and less diversity. There are also those who seek for greater breadth of opinion and practice and who are fearful of a narrow point of view which limits freedom. Whenever the church seeks to clarify its own position, there will be those who are disturbed and believe that they are being forced into compliance against their will and may feel that, for the sake of their integrity, they need to withdraw. Every time the church seeks to resolve ambiguity or conflict, it does, in fact, close doors to other options. Painful conflict over the definition of who we are and how we function continues to be a central part of our history.

Because the Presbyterian Church is a constitutional church, issues about the breadth of diversity possible within the church are dealt with by constitutional processes. In a church such as ours, it is difficult to avoid issues about which there is disagreement. Since matters of both doctrine and order are spelled out, the process of interpretation of our official documents is crucial in the determination of how much diversity can be tolerated. The Principles, themselves, deal with the tension between freedom and order as this tension is exhibited in the life of the church and in the relationship of our own church to other Christian churches within the nation.

Principle Number One

> That "God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in anything contrary to his Word, or beside it, in matters of faith or worship."
>
> 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. (G-1.0301.)

The quotation from The Westminster Confession of Faith at the beginning of the First Principle establishes the right of private judgment both for the individual or group within the church and for the church within the state. The right of private judgment is freedom from arbitrary laws, civil or ecclesiastical, which bind conscience. It is a right for freedom of obedience to Christ and it is the duty of Christians to insist upon this right. The quotation from the Westminster Confession can be understood more fully when read with the remainder of the paragraph:

> So that to believe such doctrines, or to obey such commandments out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience; and the requiring of an implicit faith and an absolute and blind obedience, is to destroy liberty of conscience, and reason also. Westminster Confession (Book of Confessions, 6.109.)

The individual has the right to dissent from church laws which the person believes to be a violation of conscience. The Principles continue to clarify this right and the polity of our church provides guarantees to protect this right. The church must also be free from those laws of the state which limit its freedom to be faithful. Conscience is both an individual and a corporate matter. The corporate conscience of the church is expressed through the governing bodies (session, presbytery, synod, and General Assembly).

The word "conscience" is used in the Westminster Confession in the ordinary sense of knowing right from wrong and no technical meaning is given or implied. It is regarded as an attribute of the human being which manifests the light of nature. Human beings are born with conscience which enables them to make moral distinctions. Conscience includes the inhibitions, social standards, and moral responsibility pertaining to membership in society, even though it may on occasion oppose both custom and social pressure. The following are examples of the uses of "conscience."

> (The saints) . . . come to be deprived of some measure of their graces and comforts; have their hearts hardened, and their consciences wounded.
>
> (Ibid., 6.096.)
>
> . . . such as truly believe in the Lord Jesus, and love him in sincerity, endeavoring to walk in all good conscience.
>
> (Ibid., 6. 097.)
>
> . , . by falling into some special sin, which woundeth the conscience, and grieveth the Spirit.
>
> (Ibid., 6. 100.)
>
> . . . that sincerity of heart and conscience of duty.
>
> (Ibid., 6. 100.)

God created humanity "male and female, with reasonable and immortal souls, endued with knowledge, righteousness, and true holiness." (Ibid., 6. 023.)

This reasonable nature given in creation is the ability to know and to do right, but God also gave human beings the liberty of will by which that original nature was corrupted by sin. The distance between God and human beings became so great that, "although reasonable creatures do owe obedience unto him as their Creator, yet they could never have any fruition of him." (Ibid. 6. 037.) Thus conscience is indistinct and can be easily confused.

Conscience can be an expression of error and the claim to the right of private judgment can be an act of disobedience to God. Although the individual within the church who chooses to exercise the right of private conscience may be right, it is also true that the individual may be wrong. Each person should take the actions of the governing bodies of the church seriously before making the claim to private conscience. The individual should also be willing to pay the price for holding a particular point of view.

> And because the powers which God hath ordained, and the liberty which Christ hath purchased, are not intended by God to destroy, but mutually to uphold and preserve one another; they who, upon pretense of Christian liberty, shall oppose any lawful power, or the lawful exercise of it, whether it be civil or ecclesiastical, resist the ordinance of God. (Ibid., 6. 111.)

The first Principle concludes with a plea for the freedom of religious societies (denominations) within the

state. The collective right of private judgment is as important as the individual right. Unless the church is free from the control of the state, there is no freedom for individuals. Presbyterians knew from historic experience the dangers of state control of religion. They wanted no part in such favoritism for themselves or for any other group. The one duty which the state owes to religious groups is the creation of a climate of freedom for all which ensures that all are treated with equal fairness.

The corporate right of private judgment makes it possible for the church to be faithful to its Lord. Without special favors from the state, the church is responsible for the proclamation of its faith, the conduct of its own affairs, the exercise of discipline, the determination of its standards, and the education of its members. To ask that the state show no partiality is to be willing to accept the cost of freedom.

Whether individual or corporate, the right of private judgment is a necessary one. It includes the right to be wrong.

Principle Number Two

> 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 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. (G-1.0302.)

This second Principle makes it clear that there is no basic conflict between the freedom of conscience and the necessity for the church to make rules to order its life. The "common right" of which this principle speaks applies both to individuals and to denominations. Churches have the right to regulate their own internal affairs without government interference. Individuals, also, have the right to exercise private judgment within the decision-making processes of the church of which they are a part.

The right of each church, society, or denomination to establish its own standards is not abrogated by error. Freedom must include the right to be wrong. The liberty to err does not, in a free society, infringe upon those who are not members of the church.

Even when a church misuses its right of making judgments for itself, the dissenter still has rights. The church protects its own minority point of view as if it were protecting its future, recognizing that the dissenter may well represent the will of God. The church makes explicit provisions for the protection of those whose positions are in the minority. These provisions are made in very specific detail in order to protect the rights of all.

Every member of a governing body has the basic rights to: (1) know, (2) speak, (3) vote, (4) hold office. These rights enable every member to participate fully in the decision-making processes, being heard and exercising influence upon the body. Parliamentary practice requires that a larger than simple majority vote be necessary in order to abridge any minority rights in favor of the rights of the body (generally two-thirds). After an action is taken by any body, an individual still has guaranteed rights including the following options:

(1) The right to work for change. Every person can use the processes to rectify an action believed to be in error or to persuade the majority of the body to deal with a neglected issue. No action is permanent. Any action of a governing body can be changed. The Constitution itself can be amended. The history of our denomination shows clearly that such change does take place as members of a minority point of view continue to make their view heard until they persuade others of their position.

(2) The right of dissent, protest, or appeal. When a church body takes an action, individuals may register their disapproval. This dissent is part of the record of the governing body. If an individual believes that an irregularity has been committed by the body, the person has the right of protest or appeal.

(3) The right of passive concurrence. Most actions of church governing bodies do not require that individuals do anything by way of compliance. It is possible to continue to hold a minority point of view after the body has voted. It is not out of order for an individual to make that minority position quite public. When the governing body does require compliance with an action, it is still possible for a dissenting individual to agree to abide by the decision and to fulfill the requirements for action while, at the same time, holding a different position from that of the majority.

(4) The right of active concurrence. It is possible to have one's mind changed by the debate in a governing body. Every member must be open to the possibility that such a change of mind may take place. We pray for the guidance of the Holy Spirit in all our deliberations and actions and ought to be open to the leading of the Spirit. Change is the risk involved in participation in the proceedings of a governing body.

(5) The right of peaceful withdrawal. On some matters, the individual dissenter may not be able to submit passively to an action which involves personal conscience. The matter is too important for the person to submit. The "Form of Government" provides guidance in such a situation by citing in a footnote, the provisions of the 1758 Plan for Reunion. (See footnote to G-6.0108.) Peaceful withdrawal can be made when an individual cannot in good conscience continue membership in the governing body and is able to withdraw without creating schism.

There is always a necessary tension between freedom of one's individual conscience and belonging to any organization. One's personal point of view will most likely not always be that of the larger body. Every person who participates in a governing body must accept the fact that compromise is necessary for any body to function. The church cannot always express the will of each individual member and still take corporate action. Many decisions will involve saying "yes"

to some and "no" to others. The only alternative is for the governing body to delay or avoid making a decision. There are times when delay is a valuable way of avoiding premature decisions, especially when the minority position is held by a fairly large number of people. At other times, however, a decision must be made and the consequences of the decision may be painful.

Principle Number Three

> 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. (G-1.0303.)

The church must have order in its life and we believe that this order requires that there be officers who carry out the particular tasks of the church. Church officers are a necessity for the functioning of the whole "visible" church of Christ. Although the setting apart of some persons as ordained officers of the church is done by a particular denomination (society), it is for the whole church. We, as Presbyterians, believe that we ordain church officers for the universal church.

They act for the whole church. For example, when a minister baptizes a person, the act is done on behalf of the universal church and the person is received into the church of Jesus Christ. In the same way, we recognize the ordination of persons in other denominations and do not reordain them should they seek to exercise their ordination within our church.

Within our own denomination, church officers function as representative members of governing bodies and exercise responsibility corporately. Church officers are accountable to governing bodies and the questions asked in ordination and installation are the formal acknowledgment of that accountability. All church officers are required to give answer to the following question: "Will you be governed by our Church's polity, and will you abide by its discipline?" (G-14.0402; G-14.0207.) Church members do not need to make this affirmation but those who bear rule are required to accept the system of government as the framework within which they function.

Decisions about the exercise of discipline are made by majority vote. The purpose of disciplinary action is the preservation of right doctrine and right behavior and for the protection of the church against error and scandal. In the context of necessary decision-making, the governing bodies are required to act in accordance with the Word of God as that Word is understood and interpreted by the majority. Conclusions must be reached about the truth or error of a particular belief and about the appropriate character of particular behavior.

Decisions of governing bodies may be painful to particular individuals or groups who find themselves in minority positions. Because Presbyterians believe that truth and behavior are very important, the difficult issues and painful consequences of actions may not be avoided.

Principle Number Four

> 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 be either more pernicious or more absurd than that which brings truth and falsehood upon a level, and represents it as of no consequence what a person's opinions are. On the contrary, they 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. (G-1.0304.)

As Presbyterians we believe that God is God of the whole of life. There is, therefore, no way to disconnect faith from practice. What we believe is reflected in our actions, both individually and corporately. Wrong opinions are harmful to persons and to the unity of the body. Wrong opinions will lead to unfaithful behavior.

The truth of a particular idea is often revealed in the way it leads people to behave. The results of a particular doctrine become evident in time; time is a test of truth. The truth of a particular idea may be understood very gradually as in the case of slavery or the equality of women. Presbyterian polity provides a process through which the church can be responsive to new understandings of truth. One of the ways that the church recognizes that its understanding of truth changes is through the process of constitutional amendments. Provisions for such amendments within the constitution of the church are official recognition that new understandings develop and require changes in the way we state what we believe and the way we express that belief in our action.

Because Presbyterians take the connection between faith and practice so seriously, our debate over issues has a particular intensity. Obedience to God's will is at stake in our discussion of doctrine. Conflict is inevitable in the life of the church. Peace within the church at the expense of faithfulness is the peace of a corpse. Agreement is not always a sign of obedience, but may more likely be a sign that we do not care very passionately about a particular issue.

Presbyterian polity provides a method for dealing with conflict. The processes assure that fairness and order accompany the decision-making and that differing points of view will be openly expressed. The diversity of the church is its best equipment for dealing with significant issues. The different perspectives that people bring to the discussion enable us to experience freedom from narrow parochialism or bondage to the point of view of only one segment of society. Those governing bodies which are most inclusive are given the most significance in decision-making so that an appeal is carried from the less inclusive to the more inclusive governing body where a wider diversity of perspectives may be found.

Principle Number Five

> 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 persons 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. (G-1.0305.)

Reasonable people may differ about many matters. The church should encourage diverse points of view. Diversity may be a sign of health of the church. Uniformity may be the result of the tyranny of those in control, the failure to acknowledge differences, or the fear of ostracism.

Those beliefs and practices about which the church tolerates or encourages diversity are nonessential. The distinction between essential and nonessential articles entered our church with the Adopting Act of 1729. Nonessential issues are not unimportant but are those subjects about which diversity is understood to be desirable or acceptable. A nonessential issue is judged by a governing body of the church to be one about which agreement or compliance is not required. The General Assembly makes, for example, a particular pronouncement about an issue in the world. The issue is important and the debate of the General Assembly is intense and weighty because the consequences are important. But agreement with the position of the General Assembly is not required. People may even be encouraged by the Assembly to continue to voice contrary viewpoints.

Essential matters are those regarding which the church does require uniformity of either belief or practice. There are some issues which are so clearly understood to be essential that the church does not vote on them until a challenge is made. For example, the doctrine of the two natures of Christ was assumed to be essential until the question was raised about its essential character. Then the church is required to make a decision through its carefully defined procedures. Essential or necessary matters of faith and practice are determined by the appropriate governing body only in response to a challenge in a particular instance.

The consequent decision by an individual to withdraw is a last resort after the dissenter has exercised all the options mentioned earlier in the discussion of Principle Two. The person needs to be willing to participate in honest debate and be open to the possibility of being persuaded by the view of the majority. When the governing body has acted and has determined that the issue is essential and that compliance is therefore required, then the conscience of a dissenter may be abused if that person remains within the denomination. The freedom to withdraw from a voluntary association preserves the right of private judgment.

The individual does not make the decision about the essential character of a particular decision of a governing body. The governing body, itself, arrives at such a determination after being careful to allow sufficient time for thoughtful debate and the full consideration of differing points of view. The action of the governing body may be to determine that the issue in question is not essential. In that case, the individual is still free to speak and act from a conflicting point of view. If, however, the governing body determines that the particular question is essential and that compliance is necessary, then the individual holding a minority opinion must exercise judgment about the possible violation of conscience.

Mutual forbearance is to be exercised by individuals within the church toward one another. Forbearance is willingness to accept other people in the church who do not share our own ideas. To exercise forbearance is to accept diversity with gratitude for those who differ and willingness to remain in conversation with people whose perspective may disturb us.

Forbearance, when exercised by different denominations, is the basis for all ecumenical activity. Presbyterians are able to cooperate with Christians of other denominations because we do not believe that we have a monopoly on truth. We can, in fact, tolerate a great deal more diversity in ecumenical activity because our cooperation does not often require that we hold the same point of view. Ecumenical activity does not demand uniformity except on the particular issue which is the subject for a particular joint activity.

Principle Number Six

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. (G-1.0306.)

Holy Scripture defines the general character, qualifications, authority, and purpose of church officers but the church must interpret Scripture and establish the general rules by which it operates. Within each denomination, there must be clarity about the function of officers and the method of their selection. One denomination may choose, for example, to elect bishops while another does not. Each must be free to make its own decisions without interference from without. The civil government, for example, must not interfere with the free choice of the church.

The right of a particular society (denomination) to elect its own officers is expressed at every level of the church. General Assembly elects its own officers within its own rules as does every other governing body. The particular congregation also elects its own officers, including the pastor. Yet, each of these bodies does not function autonomously. General Assembly must elect a Moderator from among the commissioners elected by the presbyteries. The whole church determines the rules and qualifications. Each governing body must abide by these determinations.

In the election of a pastor, a congregation must choose someone who meets the requirements of the presbytery and it must be guided by the presbytery in the process of selection. The participation of the presbytery in the selection of a pastor is required by the "Form of Government." Within these limitations, the congregation has the right to elect a particular person to be its pastor. No one can dictate the choice of a

pastor for that congregation so long as there has been no violation of constitutional policy.

The balance between the freedom to elect and the duty to abide by required procedures is very important. Abuse of the balance is dangerous. When a congregation fails to follow the constitutional procedures, it may, for a time, forfeit its right of election until the presbytery determines that it is willing and able to do so. On the other hand, the presbytery may not place officers in a congregation except for a limited period of time and for a stated purpose.

Principle Number Seven

> 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 governing body 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 persons. (G-1.0307.)

Scripture is our highest authority and no governing body may legislate contrary to what Scripture plainly teaches. This respect for Scripture means that all church bodies must exercise care not claiming too much authority for themselves. Ministerial power is performed in a carefully prescribed manner in obedience to the higher authority of Scripture. Declarative power is limited to that of stating what biblical teaching is in a given situation. The proper power of the church is that of interpreting Scripture in a particular context.

No church governing body may bind conscience contrary to Scripture. It can, however interpret Scripture and require that those who disagree either submit or withdraw peaceably. Because of the right to withdraw, the individual conscience cannot be bound by actions of the church. The church may be wrong and the individual may be right but the duty of the church to render judgments is still clear.

> It belongeth to synods and councils, ministerially to determine controversies of faith, and cases of conscience; to set down rules and directions for the better ordering of the public worship of God, and government of his Church, to receive complaints in cases of maladministration, and authoritatively to determine the same: which decrees and determinations, if consonant to the Word of God, are to be received with reverence and submission, not only for their agreement with the Word of God, but also for the power whereby they are made, as being an ordinance of God, appointed thereunto in his Word.
>
> (Westminster Confession)
> (Book of Confessions, 6.174.)

When a properly constituted governing body renders a decision, great care needs to be exercised by those who find that decision troubling. Belief that wisdom is most likely to be found in the prayerful assembly of God's people is a proper caution to be remembered by those who would dismiss such actions as "unbiblical" or "misguided." Because our Presbyterian system operates slowly and carefully, and because it provides opportunities for every point of view to be heard, the likelihood of rash decision-making is decreased. At the same time, it must be admitted that such synods and councils may err.

> All synods or councils since the apostles' times, whether general or particular, may err, and many have erred; therefore they are not to be made the rule of faith or practice but to be used as a help in both. (Ibid., 6.175.)

There is no way to guarantee that church governing bodies will make decisions which are in accord with the will of God. The responsibility of such bodies to interpret the Scriptures is done from a limited perspective and a bias rooted in a particular time and place. All those who participate in such interpretation are shaped by their culture and, consequently, bring to the Scriptures a subjective filter which sometimes screens out what is central and fixes upon a peripheral matter. All decision-making bodies must exercise caution. The "usurped claim of making laws" is a potential hazard which every governing body must recognize. Such a claim is the overstepping of ministerial and declarative functions. Usurped claims are those which are contrary to Scripture.

Those who believe that a particular decision is in error have carefully described rights and duties. They may seek change within the processes of the church. Individuals and governing bodies may seek review of decisions by the more inclusive governing bodies. Amendments to the Constitution are another way of recognizing the need to rectify error.

Principle Number Eight

> 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. (G-1.0308.)

The church must trust that truth can be discerned, that it is possible for the will of God to be understood and obeyed. The church follows the intention of its own polity, with careful study of Scripture and a sincere desire to be obedient to its Lord. As Presbyterians, we believe that taking seriously our own "Form of Government" and applying it to particular situations with integrity and caution is the best way to assure that God's will for us will be discerned. We believe that no system of government can be perfect. Even though our best intentions may sometimes lead to error, we seek no intervention from nor assistance by the civil government. The freedom of the church is a necessity for its faithfulness.

Divisiveness and schism are most likely to occur when the church does not follow its own procedures carefully. When an attempt is made to force consensus before the time is right, the impatience of those who

demand premature action may produce a lack of proper attention to the convictions of a large minority. Such a lack is one which produces ill will and potential for schism. Another example of the misuse of our polity is the neglect by any one part of the church of the other parts. When a congregation, for example, ignores the presbytery or the constitutional provisions for its election procedures, the result is almost always detrimental to its own health. When the presbytery neglects its role by failing to exercise one of its constitutional functions, the other parts of the church suffer. One result of the neglect by the presbytery of its duty may be that the General Assembly, in an effort to fill the gap, legislates beyond its properly delegated authority.

The imperfections and errors of the church are usually quite clear to those within who are impatient with the slow processes by which the church rectifies past mistakes or with the reluctance of the church to take a particular action. Such concern and impatience are signs of passionate conviction. Yet the careful and sometimes tedious processes of our polity have been designed out of the historic experience of the church as it has sought to deal with conflict.

The Historic Principles affirm the orderly way by which the church handles conflict so that the rights of the minority are protected from the tyranny of the majority and, at the same time, the rights of the majority are protected from the paralysis of the intransigence of a minority. Sometimes only time can enable us to judge rightly on decisions of the church. Until then, there are many occasions when we are of necessity called upon to exercise restraint, caution, and patience, trusting that what we see to be error may turn out to be wisdom.

B. *Radical Principles*

The church later adopted another paragraph which is often referred to as the Radical Principles:

> The radical principles of Presbyterian Church government and discipline are:
>
> That the several different congregations of believers, taken collectively, constitute one Church of Christ, called emphatically the Church. . . . (G-1.0400.)

The "radical" or "root" principles were adopted by the General Assembly in the 1790's as further explication of what became known as the "Preliminary Principles." They spell out the particular way in which Presbyterians order their affairs. The first of these "radical" principles establishes the nature of the church as a body. There is one body which is the church and all the diverse parts of that body make up the whole.

Action on the part of any governing body has an impact upon all the others. Presbyterian polity seeks to express the wholeness and unity of the church by insisting upon the interrelatedness of all the parts. Each congregation, for example, is but one part of the whole. The limited vision and often quite homogeneous composition of any single congregation needs the balance of perspective and broader inclusion of the other governing bodies. Particular congregations are a necessity for the function of the whole church but they are to be understood "as a local expression of the universal church." (G-4.0102.)

Central to Presbyterian polity is the insistence upon consultation and coordination among the various parts of the whole. Each governing body must conduct its business with faithfulness to the constitutional procedures requiring consultation with other bodies.

This shared authority among the governing bodies of the church can be vividly demonstrated in the procedures for the ordination of ministers of the Word. The session of a particular church recommends a candidate under care, the presbytery supervises the candidate's education and trials for ordination and approves the candidate for ordination; the synod advises on exceptions to constitutional requirements for ordination, and if there is disagreement with the presbytery, the presbytery may override the synod only by a majority vote of three fourths; the General Assembly has the responsibility for the Presbyteries' Cooperative Examinations for Candidates; and finally, a particular congregation calls a candidate before that candidate may be ordained. No one governing body alone has authority over the "making of a minister." This interrelationship of various governing bodies demonstrates our understanding of the unity and wholeness of the church.

> . . . that a larger part of the church, or a representation of it, should govern a smaller, or determine matters of controversy which arise therein. (G-1.0400.)

The system of more and less inclusive governing bodies demonstrates both the unity and the diversity of the whole church. The larger part of the church is given authority over the smaller. Each governing body is representative of a part of the church and it is given a particular role to play in the whole with carefully described powers and duties. Each governing body also has limitations upon its acts imposed by the Constitution.

> . . . that, in like manner, a representation of the whole should govern and determine in regard to every part, and to all the parts united: that is, that a majority shall govern. (G-1.0400.)

The General Assembly is the governing body which represents the whole church and it is, therefore, the highest authority among the various parts of the church. It is the duty of the General Assembly to interpret the Constitution of the Church in response to requests or in the resolution of controversy. Every governing body is composed of persons who are elected to represent the church. Representatives are not simply to reflect the will of the people but rather to seek together to find and represent the will of Christ for the Church. For this reason, the polity of the Church requires that representatives may not be instructed nor vote by proxy. They must have the freedom to participate in debate. Debate within the context of prayer is properly open to the movement of the Holy Spirit. Representatives must be open to the possibility of having their minds changed and the rules for

the conduct of debate are designed so this may happen.

The responsibility of the majority to govern must be seen in the context of the requirement that the whole governs the parts. Majority rule is not a mystical or abstract concept. It is simply a reflection of the fact that the whole church, as it acts, can do only that which most of the church is willing to do. When through the violation or short circuit of proper procedure the will of a minority is imposed on a judicatory or on the church, seriously divisive conflict is often the result. The Constitution defines the majority in various ways to meet various circumstances:

(1) Simple majority (1/2 + 1) is the basis for most decisions in a governing body. When a very close majority vote is taken on an issue of importance, the result is often troubling. The parliamentary practices of the church permit the Moderator to vote in the event of a tie vote. This moderatorial vote may defeat the issue at hand until a larger majority can express itself.

(2) A two-thirds majority vote is required in order to amend the Doctrinal Standards, or to achieve union with another denomination. (G-18.0201; G-15.0301.) This larger majority requirement is a recognition of the need for greater consensus on issues of great magnitude.

(3) A three-fourths majority is required of the presbytery in order to grant an exemption to a congregation for failure to meet requirements that both men and women be elected as elders and deacons (G-14.0202a) or to override the requirements for ordination in an exceptional situation (G-14.0308).

These different definitions of "majority" are the recognition of the need for greater agreement about issues which are most critical or where the unity of the church is most threatened.

> (4). . . and consequently that appeals may be carried from lower to higher governing bodies, till they be finally decided by the collected wisdom and united voice of the whole Church. For these principles and this procedure, the example of the apostles and the practice of the primitive church are considered as authority. (G-1.0400.)

The unity of the church is exemplified in the provision for appeals from one governing body to another. When an individual believes that a wrong has been committed in a congregation, for example, that person may appeal to a more inclusive governing body, the presbytery, and failing to be satisfied there, may carry the complaint on to the synod and General Assembly.

This right of appeal recognizes the right and duty of the more inclusive governing body to make decisions binding upon the less inclusive body. It also recognizes the right of persons to seek for redress of grievances within the polity of the church, reducing the need for persons to engage in disputes outside the church in the civil courts.

There must be a final arbiter of disputes, a court of last appeal, as it were. The unity of the church requires that there is a point beyond which a vocal minority which has been given every opportunity to press its case cannot be permitted to thwart the expressed will of the majority. Once the General Assembly has expressed its will, there is no further appeal except the action of another General Assembly.

IV. The Amendment Process And The Rights Of Conscientious Minorities

The overture which requested a "solemn interpretation" of relationship between freedom of conscience and the requirements of the church's polity made specific reference to the amendment process. To what degree is an individual, previously ordained in good conscience, bound by a subsequent decision of the church to amend its polity or theology in ways that the individual feels to be a violation of conscience? If the church changes its mind on a sensitive and controversial subject—perhaps through a growing consensus which eventually becomes a majority—must all the officers of the church change their minds?

Clearly, however, the church has the right to change its mind, "new occasions teach new duties." From the beginning all parts of the church's Constitution have been subject to amendment, and all have frequently been amended. The church continually studies the Scriptures and prays for guidance of the Spirit. It would be futile to do that if the church had no way to deal with new insights and no way to express more relevant applications of ancient truth to its contemporary life. The church in its corporate life must reflect the reformation motto of the Reformed Church in the Netherlands: *Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda.* (The Church Reformed always being reformed.)

When the Constitution was adopted in 1788 the amendment process was incompletely described. The "Form of Government" said:

> Before any overtures or regulations, proposed by the Assembly to be established as standing rules, shall be obligatory on the churches, it shall be necessary to transmit them to all the Presbyteries, and to receive the returns of, at least, a majority of the Presbyteries, in writing, approving thereof. ("Form of Government," 1st edition, 1788, Chapter XI, Sect. VI.)

This provision appears to be modeled on the "Barrier Act" adopted by the Church of Scotland in 1697, which eliminated the initiative and authority of the Parliament of Scotland in day-to-day ecclesiastical affairs. Henceforth regulations and procedures in the Church of Scotland could be amended only at the initiative of the General Assembly and with the approval of a majority of the presbyteries.

A second edition of the "Form of Government" of the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., was approved in 1792, because the first edition was no longer available. The General Assembly appointed a committee to compile scriptural proof-texts for both the confessional documents and the "Form of Government." This committee, which finally reported in 1796, recommended no changes in the Constitution; but in addition to the proof-texts apparently also added the

"radical Principles" paragraph (G-1.0400), which was a footnote in the "Form of Government" of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. until 1958. It then became part of the Constitution of The United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America.

In 1798 the General Assembly adopted a fairly elaborate procedure by which ministers and licentiates from other countries, mainly Britain and Ireland, were to be received. The substance of these regulations was to make it more difficult for foreign ministers to come into the church. John Rodgers entered a protest against this action, and in 1799 the General Assembly received a strong protest from the Presbytery of New York attacking the new rules as "unnecessary and obnoxious" and stating: "If the General Assembly designed these regulations as a standing rule . . . they violated the 6th section of the 11th chapter of our own Constitution" requiring "standing rules" to be approved by the presbyteries.

The General Assembly of 1799 responded by defending the new rules (although agreeing to some modifications of them) but objected to the implication that regulations of all sorts must be submitted to the presbyteries before being adopted. This, it said, "would reduce the Assembly to a mere committee to prepare business upon which the presbyteries might act."[11] The Assembly admitted, however, that the "Form of Government" was ambiguous in its use of the term "standing rules," and suggested that the phrase "constitutional rules" be substituted. The presbyteries were asked to approve this change.

The very ambiguity alleged prevented several presbyteries from acting; they simply assumed that no change was necessary and did not vote, and in 1800 only 10 of the 25 presbyteries sent responses (approving the proposed change: six to four). The next two General Assemblies deferred action, and in 1803 a committee was appointed "to consider whether any, and if any, what, alterations ought to be made" in the "Form of Government." The committee recommended a number of changes including the substitution of the phrase "constitutional rules," in Chapter II. These were approved by the General Assembly in 1804 and sent to the presbyteries which approved all of them.

The next proposed constitutional change came in 1811, establishing procedures for ordaining ministers without a formal call. It was rejected by the presbyteries; resubmitted in 1813 and again rejected. In 1820, after several years of consideration, extensive amendments were proposed which amounted to a rewriting of the entire "Form of Government." The General Assembly instructed the presbyteries that they were to vote separately on each chapter, section, and article of the proposed revision. Fortunately, every article was approved, and an extensively revised edition of the "Form of Government" was adopted in 1821.

The church has been much more willing to amend and change the "Form of Government" and the procedures for discipline than it has been to change its confessional basis. The church, in the Adopting Act, 1729, received and adopted the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms "in their essential articles" as its creed. In 1788 the Synod in accepting the new "Form of Government" changed the Westminster Confession to conform to the American understanding of the relationship between the church and the "Civil Magistrate," and an amendment offered from the floor in 1788 dropped a phrase from the Larger Catechism which appeared to at least one commissioner to teach intolerance of other Christian denominations (though the references to the Pope as "that Antichrist, that Man of sin and Son of Perdition" were not removed until the twentieth century). Through the nineteenth century there were minor changes in the Westminster documents, and in 1903 a series of amendments were adopted by the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. and two chapters were added which slightly ameliorated Westminster's seventeenth century interpretation of Calvinism. The church also adopted a "Declaratory Statement" in 1903 which was "the authoritative interpretation" of Chapter III of the Westminster Confession. The "authoritative interpretation" was that Chapter III does not mean what it says. In 1967 The United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. amended its confessional basis and adopted the "Book of Confessions." The Presbyterian Church in the United States through the years made very similar changes in the Westminster documents, but had not enlarged its confessional basis prior to reunion.

All these changes in the polity and theology of the church were made in accordance with the procedure outlined in the Constitution itself. Many were minor and uncontroversial. Others were bitterly controversial at the time because they made significant changes in the church's government or reflected significant changes in its theology. It is perhaps significant that none of the major schisms that have divided American Presbyterianism (1741, 1810, 1834, 1861) was a direct reaction to amendments to the church's form of government or confession of faith. Some, who in the last decade or so departed both the antecedent denominations from which our church was formed, alleged constitutional changes as among their grievances; but in most cases it appears that these defections were caused by theological and ecclesiastical issues, and not by constitutional changes.

Each of these hundreds of amendments to the government, discipline, and theology of the church became effective upon its adoption and in each case was binding upon individual officers in the same way and to the same degree that the confessions, polity, and discipline of the church were already binding. At ordination the ordinand responds to the constitutional questions in the context of a Constitution that is subject to change by amendment. The relevance of changes upon an individual's conscience becomes apparent, however, when the officer is installed to a new work or a new term of office in the context of an amended constitution.

From the time of the Adopting Act of 1729 the confessional documents have not been interpreted as binding in all their details upon the theological views of all

church officers. Therefore the amendments to the confessional documents are also not absolutely binding. Presbyterian ministers and elders were free to believe after the revisions of 1903, as they were before, that God did "foreordain some men and angels to everlasting damnation" notwithstanding the "Declaratory Statement" to the contrary. Any Presbyterian officer who believed that the remarriage of divorced persons was usually unscriptural and sinful had the right and the freedom to hold that opinion and act on it, though the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. in 1953 changed the prohibition in the Westminster Confession of Faith against remarriage of divorced persons, and the Presbyterian Church in the U.S. did the same thing in 1959.

The situation regarding the requirements and prohibitions of the "Form of Government" is different; because polity often requires compliance in behavior, whereas the confessional standards may not. If the church prohibits the ordination of persons not seminary graduates, no presbytery—however strongly it may feel that the conditions in its area makes this prohibition unwise—can be free to ordain such persons. The Presbytery of Cumberland discovered this in the early years of the nineteenth century.

When the church required that slaveholders be barred from communion, as the Associate Synod of North America (subsequently part of the United Presbyterian Church of North America and now of our reunited church) did in 1831, then no congregation could admit them. When the Associate Synod of North America united with the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church in 1858 to form the United Presbyterian Church of North America, the Synod of the South of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church felt compelled to remain out of the union on this point.

When the church did not permit the ordination of women, no church governing body had the freedom to conduct such ordinations; even though it may have strongly felt that the church's practice in this regard was unwise, unscriptural, even heretical. The church's polity, like its confessions, cannot compel uniformity of opinion as it can of behavior. Presbyterian officers were free to believe in 1920 that women should be eligible for ordination. They were free to work to make the change in the church's Constitution that would permit it. They were free to withdraw from the denomination and to form another more to their liking. But they were not free to ordain women in violation of the church's Constitution as it was then interpreted.

Illustrations of this principle abound. The church cannot compel its officers to support the overseas missionary program of the denomination. But it can prohibit them from becoming members of an "independent" board of foreign missions. Whether it is wise to do so is beside the point. The church could not compel Professor J. Gresham Machen's conscience in the 1930's on this point. But it could discipline him for his refusal to resign his membership on the independent mission board.

There are scores of ways—some important, some trivial; some controversial, some not—in which our church's "Form of Government," and that of our predecessor denominations, require and prohibit conduct on the part of officers and governing bodies. A presbytery may not receive an individual as a candidate for the ministry who has not been a member of a congregation in that presbytery for at least six months (G-14.0303). One does not have to approve of that requirement. The majority of the presbytery may wish to establish a longer or a shorter period, but it may not do so. Each synod must meet at least biennially (G-12.0201). One may strongly feel that this is a waste of money and human energy, and wish that the synods met quadrennially. Anyone who feels this way has the right to try to persuade the majority of the church to this view. Such a person may also decline to be elected as a commissioner to a synod. But the synod itself may not decide to meet quadrennially.

A person who believes that worship should be held on Saturday may be a Presbyterian, and may even be ordained as an officer (assuming the presbytery or session conducting the ordination judged this scruple to be "nonessential"). But a session has no right to convene the congregation regularly to worship on Saturday instead of Sunday (S-2.0200). One whose conscience required Saturday worship would normally do better in a denomination other than Presbyterian.

Such examples could be multiplied. While neither the confessions nor the polity of the church can compel an individual to a belief that is contrary to that individual's conscientious understanding of the word or the will of God, the polity of the church—as distinct from the confessions—can and inevitably must compel conformity to those procedures and practices which the majority of the church has determined to be the most appropriate or desirable or faithful. In its confessional statements the church confesses its own faith. Individuals within the church may properly avow a diversity of theological views within the general context of the church's confessional basis. In certain areas diversity of practice is also possible. Some congregations sing Bach, some prefer "Sweet By and By." Some ministers wear Geneva tabs and academic hoods in the pulpit, some wear white suits and red blouses. Some presbyteries meet monthly, some meet quarterly. Some have a committee on necrology, others give this function to the Stated Clerk. The "Form of Government" permits this diversity, but it could be amended to require uniformity in any or all these areas.

Ultimately officers must conform their actions—not necessarily their beliefs or opinions—to the church's practice in those areas where the church has determined that uniformity is necessary or desirable.

V. Conclusions

(1) The rights of the individual conscience with regard to matters of faith and worship and to decisions made within the church are related to the right of voluntary association. The membership of an individual in the church is purely voluntary. The possibility of

peaceable withdrawal from the church, which was articulated in the formation of the Synod of New York in 1741 and explicitly reiterated in the Reunion of 1758, is now cited in the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). The right to withdraw peaceably protects individuals from having their consciences bound by decisions of the governing bodies of the church.

(2) The rights of the individual, the minority and absentees are carefully protected rights within the Constitution and by the parliamentary practices of the church. Individuals have every reasonable right to press their case to try to persuade the majority of the church to their point of view and, having failed, they still have the right to enter a formal dissent or protest on the records of the governing body to which they belong.

(3) When a person is ordained to office in the Presbyterian Church, that person knows what the Presbyterian Church is and what its position is. The Constitution of the church contains clear provisions for its own amendment. Every church officer is ordained or installed within a church which is changing.

(4) The fact that the church permits diversity of theological beliefs but in many areas requires uniformity of practice does not exalt polity over theology. It is simply a recognition that in at least some areas practice must be uniform in order to define the church's identity. Whether it is wise in a particular matter for the church to require uniformity of practice is always debatable but the will of the majority is necessarily expressed in response to a particular challenge or dispute. Church officers must conform their actions, though not necessarily their personal beliefs or opinions, to the practice of the church in areas which the church has determined to be necessary or essential.

(5) The right of peaceable withdrawal should be exercised only when the individual cannot actively concur in decisions made by church governing bodies, nor passively submit to them. The decision to withdraw without attempt to create schism should only be made as a last resort. Those contemplating this option should remember the injunction of the Plan of Reunion of 1758, "Provided always that this shall be understood to extend only to such determination as the body shall judge indispensable in doctrine or Presbyterian government."

(6) Schism is generally the result of an improper understanding or use of Presbyterian polity. Lessons available to us from our history suggest the following as contributing factors:

a. minority or majority assumes to itself extra-constitutional prerogatives.

b. a governing body assumes to itself extra-constitutional prerogatives.

c. a governing body acts on crucial matters which affect the whole church, even with proper authority, but without giving consideration to consultation and the slow process necessary to aid in the building of consensus.

d. a governing body assumes the simple majority to be sufficient for taking action binding the conscience of a large minority.

e. a governing body violates the Constitution in which our visible unity is defined.

f. a governing body is perceived to offend or violate the right of the individual to know, to debate, to vote, or to hold office. Such offense can be in the eye of the beholder as a result of suspicion or a sense of having been excluded from serious involvement.

g. an individual church officer or group of church officers become isolated from the governing body and see the action of the body as that of an enemy, thus refusing to take such action with seriousness.

(7) Forbearance is a very important principle which needs to govern our actions. As we enter a new relationship with each other in the reunited church, we should be aware of the advisability of having a period of time for both sides to become acquainted. There are many areas of our life which do not and will not require uniformity of belief or practice. Respect for diversity is a central requirement for the peace and unity of the church.

(8) The "Form of Government" of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) makes the process of amending the Constitution somewhat more difficult and less subject to the desire of a temporary majority. Time will be needed to determine to what extent changes, if any, need to be made in the new Constitution. Issues of great moment in one era often fade into the background with the passing of time. Governing bodies of our church should not be immediately burdened with a plethora of amendments to the Constitution.

(9) The church is never static. In our effort to work for needed changes, we also need to remember that the church is always imperfect. Efforts to establish mandatory provisions to insure uniformity of function should be made with caution and sensitivity.

> This catholic Church hath been sometimes more, sometimes less, visible. And particular churches, which are members thereof, are more or less pure, according as the doctrine of the gospel is taught and embraced, ordinances administered, and public worship performed more or less purely in them.
>
> (The Westminster Confession)
> (Book of Confessions, 6.143.)

The toleration of imperfection in the church is an exercise in patience and a necessary attitude to establish a balance between the purity and the unity of the church.

(10) There is a sense in which the Historic Principles of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) are the Adopting Act of 1729 brought up-to-date and applied to polity as well as doctrine. They provide the church with guidelines to shape our actions. They insure the rights of all, protecting those of both the minority and the majority. When the Principles are understood and followed with care, the church will be able to tolerate diversity and, at the same time, be able to make necessary decisions regarding its life and mission.

Footnotes

Minutes, Synod of Philadelphia, 1729, p.13; reprinted, Guy Klett, ed., *Minutes of the Presbyterian Church in America,* 1706-1788, Philadelphia; Presbyterian Historical Society, p. 105. All subsequent citations to the minutes are from this edition.

2. Leonard J. Trinterud, *The Forming of an American Tradition,* Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1949, pp. 48ff.
3. *Minutes,* Synod of New York and Philadelphia, 1758, p. 341.
4. See Trinterud, pp. 279-306 for a description of the organization of the General Assembly and the writing of the form of government. The two older "standard" histories of the church are also useful: C. A. Briggs, *American Presbyterianism,* pp. 362-373; and Charles Hodge, *History of the Presbyterian Church,* pp. 408-415. Hodge is "Old Side," "Old School," Briggs is "New Side," "New School" in sympathy.
5. *Minutes,* 1785, p. 597.
6. Idem.
7. Trinterud, p. 292.
8. See *ibid,* pp. 152ff. for details.
9. Letter from Matthew Wilson to John Miller, June 11, 1786; cited by Trinterud, p. 286.
10. *Minutes,* 1788, p. 634.
11. *Minutes,* General Assembly, 1799, p. 179.

Recommendations

The committee recommends:

1. That the General Assembly receive this report and distribute it throughout the church as a vehicle for dialogue leading to further understanding of our theology and polity.

2. That the General Assembly adopt the following resolution as the solemn interpretation requested by the 194th General Assembly (1982) of The United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America:

The Historic Principles of Presbyterianism have sought to establish balance between the private judgment of the individual and the freedom of the church to order its affairs. While the majority cannot force its will on an unwilling minority, neither can the minority thwart the intention of the majority on the grounds that the conscience of the minority is violated. Freedom of conscience does not require that the conscientious opinion of every member of the church will prevail. Where there are differences of opinion, our church recognizes that the ways of resolving conflict between the freedom of individual conscience and the requirements of our polity are compromise, acquiescence by one group or another, or withdrawal without causing schism. Therefore freedom of conscience is not abridged by the requirements of our Constitution.