



Summary of the Eight Historical Principles

The Historical Principles of Presbyterian Polity are not new. They were created in 1788 and provide a foundation of theology and practice for our church government. These documents are invaluable learnings that provide ways to solve problems when there is not a clear explanation from precedent or from the Book of Order.



Historical Principle #1 & #2

- **HISTORICAL PRINCIPLE #1: God is Lord of the Conscience**

- *a. 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."*
- *b. 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.*
- This HP declares the right of persons to have faith in the way they understand faith. No person or no organization can dictate what a person is to believe. The "boundaries" about belief in the church, of course, is scripture. Scripture provides the basis for what we believe; however, the interpretation of scripture is always a challenge. Nevertheless, people have the right to their own personal beliefs and the church cannot interfere with those beliefs.

- **HISTORICAL PRINCIPLE #2: Corporate Judgment**

- *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.*
- That while HP #1 provides the freedom for people to believe as God leads them to believe, it is the right of the denomination to determine the standards that are to be upheld by its members. Terms of membership into the church, qualifications of leaders, and the whole internal government of the church is left for denomination determination.



Historical Principles #3 and #4

- **HISTORICAL PRINCIPLE #3: Church Officers**

- *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*
- Leadership is critical for the mission of the church. Church Officers have three main functions: preach the gospel, administer the sacrament, and exercise discipline. Teaching Elders, Ruling Elders, and Deacons are the church officers in the PCUSA. Each office has particular functions that they are responsible for. They are also responsible to ensure that scandal or erroneous actions are not taken.



- **HISTORICAL PRINCIPLE #4: Truth and Goodness**

- *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 either be more pernicious or more absurd than that which brings truth and falsehood upon a level, and represents it as of no consequence what a man's opinions are. On the contrary, we 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.*
- The church is called upon to seek truth in order to have goodness. The truth will set you free. There is also a direct connection between the truth and our duty; between what we believe and how we live. If truth has no consequence in our lives, what is its purpose?



Historical Principle #5 and #6

- ▶ **HISTORICAL PRINCIPLE #5: Mutual Forbearance**

- ▶ *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 men 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.*

- ▶ People in seeking the truth will come to different conclusions. That being so, there is a need for mutual forbearance – or willing to understand another point of view. Such a Principle is acting in accord with God's Spirit so that a fuller understanding of the truth may be realized.



- ▶ **HISTORICAL PRINCIPLE #6: Election by the people**

- ▶ *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.*

- ▶ While scripture provides standards and qualifications for leaders of the church, it is the right of each congregation to elect their leadership. After election, it becomes the responsibility of the Session to determine if the person meets the qualifications and is eligible for ordination and/or installation.



Historical Principle #7 and #8

- **HISTORICAL PRINCIPLE #7: Church Power**

- *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 judicatory 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 men.*
- There are only two powers in the church: ministerial and declarative. Ministerial is the caring for the members of the congregation and sharing with them the meaning of the Gospel and our faith. Declarative power is to proclaim the word in sermon, writings, word, and deed. No other power exists in the church.

- **HISTORICAL PRINCIPLE #8: Value of Ecclesiastical Discipline**

- *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.*
- Should the preceding principles be followed and discipline enacted, the church has a better chance of being faithful and happy as an organization.