

And when they had preached the gospel to that city, and had taught many, they returned again to Lystra, and to Iconium, and Antioch.

Confirming the souls of the disciples, and exhorting them to continue in the faith, and that we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God.

And when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed.

Acts 14:21-23 (AV)

Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.

Westminster Shorter Catechism Q. 1

1

The Nature of Presbyterianism

IT is the purpose of this work to further our understanding of the history behind the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod (RPCES), with a view to a better understanding of the Church in her present state. In other words, this history is based upon the conviction that a better understanding of the Church's past will contribute to a better understanding of her present; indeed, that an adequate understanding of the Church in the present is impossible without some acquaintance with the Church's past. For a little reflection will reveal that no Church can be understood apart from the history which has given her birth.

Now the RPCES is explicitly a *Presbyterian* Church, and the history behind the RPCES a distinctly Presbyterian history—but what is Presbyterianism? What are its fundamental principles? What are the basic concepts underlying the Presbyterian Church? What is a Presbyterian, and what does he believe? These questions must be dealt with to some extent if the distinctly *Presbyterian* history before us is to be intelligible. Indeed, this history is unintelligible without some comprehension of the materials out of which it has been produced, the stuff out of which it is made. The present chapter is a summary account of the most basic principles of Presbyterianism for the purpose of providing the building-blocks of the history behind the RPCES. It must be borne in mind that as such it is merely an introduction to Presbyterian principles and not a defense of them.

Presbyterianism may, of course, mean different things to different people. The aim here is a brief introduction to Pres-

byterianism in terms of a more or less traditional understanding of it, and as it would be generally understood today within the RPCES. Following a brief survey of the historical roots of Presbyterianism there is an account of its three chief principles having to do with the authority, confession, and life of the Christian Church.

Historic Presbyterianism

Presbyterianism originally has reference to a particular form of church government, namely rule by presbyters or elders, but historically it has meant much more than this. Indeed, the traditional Presbyterian has a profound historical sense, a deep consciousness of continuity with the past. There is a sense of oneness with the true covenant people of God throughout the ages. The Presbyterian feels himself a part of the history of salvation recorded in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. He feels one with the patriarchs and prophets of the Old and the apostles and disciples of the New. Above all, he claims to hold to no other religion than that of generic apostolic Christianity. It is ever his aim to continue steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship (Acts 2:42).

Now from the standpoint of history the Presbyterian understanding of apostolic Christianity is *Catholic* in the old sense of the term—in that, first, it has a deep sense of the visible unity of the church universal as the covenant people of God; and, second, it holds to the content of the Apostles' Creed and of those historic trinitarian creeds developed by the old catholic church. Obviously Presbyterianism is not Catholic in the Greek or Roman sense since it is *Protestant*, holding to the great evangelical doctrines of the Reformation: the sole authority of Scripture, salvation by grace alone through faith alone, and the priesthood of every believer. However, historically Presbyterianism represents a distinctive form of Protestantism as expressed in the Reformation. It is

not Lutheran, not Anglican, not Anabaptist—but *Reformed*.¹ That is, it holds to the basic doctrinal tenets of John Calvin and the great Calvinistic divines who followed in his train. Again, historic Presbyterianism is not simply Calvinistic or Reformed; it is distinctively Presbyterian! That is, it represents not only the Reformed Orthodoxy of the Continent but the Puritan Presbyterianism of the British Isles. It holds to the Puritan ideal of a pure church maintained by the discipline of a presbyterian system of church government. This purity, both doctrinal and ethical, is an integral aspect of life in covenant with God. It is the expression of the church's faithfulness to the covenant obligations imposed by the God of law and grace.

So then historic Presbyterianism is not simply Catholic, Protestant, and Reformed—but Presbyterian! It is the Presbyterian doctrine of the church, as prescribing life in solemn covenant with God, which is its distinguishing feature.

Historic Presbyterianism is set forth in the Westminster Standards drawn up in the mid-seventeenth century. Holding to the basic content of these subordinate standards is the mark of every true Presbyterian Church. It is not our purpose here to reproduce these standards but simply to summarize the most basic features of the Presbyterianism which they espouse. Perhaps the best way to do this is to discuss Presbyterianism in terms of three basic principles:

There is, first of all, the *formal* principle of Presbyterianism, that which determines the structure and character of its thought and life. This principle has to do with the authority of the Bible—the Presbyterian's authoritative guide for thinking and living. Second, there is the *material* principle which has to do with the content, rather than the form, of what a Presbyterian believes; or, in other words, with his confession of faith or doctrine. Third, there is the *practical* principle

1. This is not to imply that there was no strong Reformed element in the Anglican Reformation, but simply alludes to the fact that the Church of England was not a thoroughly Reformed Church in the sixteenth century.

which has to do with how the Presbyterian lives; in other words, with his view of the church and life therein. Interestingly enough, these three essential principles are suggested by the content of the three basic ordination questions traditionally asked in the Presbyterian Churches of America.

One Infallible Authority

The Presbyterian Churches have traditionally held that there is one infallible authority in the Church of Jesus Christ, and only one, the Bible. For this reason the first question traditionally put to the candidate for ordination is as follows: 'Do you believe the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament to be the Word of God, the only infallible rule of faith and practice?'² This language simply echoes that of the Westminster Larger Catechism: 'The holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament *are* the word of God, the only rule of faith and obedience' (Q. 3).³ This doctrine of Scripture as the word of God is admirably set forth in the celebrated first chapter of the Westminster Confession of Faith.⁴

2. *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.*, 1900, 370, 374, 379. From *The Form of Government* (FG) XIII, iv; XIV, vii; XV, xii. The first question put to the candidate in the old Reformed Presbyterian Church, General Synod (RPCGS) is very similar: 'Do you acknowledge the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the word of God?' *Reformation Principles Exhibited Being the Declaration and Testimony of the Reformed Presbyterian Church in North America (RPE)*, 1892 (6th ed.), 137. This work, in its various editions (this 6th ed. is the last published by the RPCGS), embodies the doctrine and distinctives of the Church.

3. Westminster Shorter Catechism (WSC) Q. 2. All direct quotations from the Westminster Standards, unless otherwise indicated, follow *The Confession of Faith, etc.*, issued by the Publications Committee of the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland, 1967. This is by far the best available edition of the original Westminster Standards.

4. Cf. G. H. Clark, *What Do Presbyterians Believe?*, 1965, 275: 'Metaphorically the first chapter of the Westminster Confession is a continental divide. Although the written Word of God has been the touchstone of pure doctrine in all ages, the twentieth century shows still more clearly that this chapter forms the great divide between two types of religion, or to make it of broader application, between two types of philosophy. Perhaps it would be plainer to say that the acceptance of the Bible as God's written revelation separates true Christianity from all other types of thought.' Clark's exposition of the WCF is in general a

The Confession assumes that all authority is ultimately vested in God the Creator, and mediated to man made in the image of God by way of revelation. There is, first of all, natural revelation—God’s word in ‘the light of nature’ and the works of creation and providence. However, this word, while sufficient to render all men inexcusable, is insufficient to provide that knowledge of God which is necessary for salvation. Consequently God has been pleased to provide a special, or redemptive, revelation for the purpose of leading men to salvation. In the wisdom of God, whatever of this revealed truth is profitable for the whole church was wholly committed to writing for the purpose of ‘better preserving and propagating the truth.’ These factors, plus the cessation of the various modes of special revelation, render the holy Scriptures ‘most necessary’ to the people of God. Thus the *necessity* of Scripture is based upon the insufficiency of natural revelation, the cessation of special revelation, and the good pleasure of God in taking care to preserve His revelation to reveal His will, by means of holy writings (I, i).⁵

After setting forth the necessity of Scripture, the Confession defines Holy Scripture as the Word of God written, which is coextensive with the books of the Old and New

helpful introduction to Presbyterian doctrine. Cf. other commentaries on the Confession such as A. A. Hodge or G. I. Williamson.

5. Cf. B. B. Warfield, *The Westminster Assembly and Its Work*, 1931, 195. There are two excellent articles by Warfield in this work on Chapter I of the Westminster Confession: the first more general on the chapter as a whole, entitled ‘The Westminster Doctrine of Holy Scripture’ (155 ff); and the second on a specific aspect of that doctrine, entitled ‘The Doctrine of Inspiration of the Westminster Divines’ (261 ff). See especially 191 ff. on the contents of the chapter. Warfield is without a doubt the most thorough exponent of the Westminster and Biblical doctrine of Scripture in recent times. See, e.g., *Revelation and Inspiration* (1931) and *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (1948). For a recent and thoroughgoing challenge to Warfield’s traditional interpretation of the Confession, see J. B. Rogers, *Scripture in the Westminster Confession: A Problem in Historical Interpretation for American Presbyterianism*, 1966. This challenge is most certainly a failure; nevertheless, the book is a very helpful introduction to the subject expressed in its title. No doubt Warfield, were he alive, would say of it what he once said (1894) of the works of others: ‘Is it not a pity that men are not content with corrupting our doctrine, but must also corrupt our history?’ (*Westminster Assembly*, 333).

Testaments—‘all of which are given by inspiration of God to be the rule of faith and life’ (I, ii). This simply reflects the apostolic dictum that all Scripture is inspired of God, that is, God-breathed (II Tim. 3:16).⁶ The books commonly called the Apocrypha are excluded from the canon of Scripture on the ground that they are not the product of divine inspiration but merely human writings (I, iii). Thus the *definition* of Scripture is most basically the written Word of God—further defined extensively in terms of the canon, intensively in terms of inspiration, as well as exclusively in the rejection of the Apocrypha and all other merely human writings.

The *authority* of Scripture rests wholly upon the God of truth who produced it, who is indeed its Author, by means of inspiration; or more particularly, upon the nature of Scripture as the word of Him who cannot lie. ‘It is to be received because it is the Word of God’ (I, iv). In other words, Scripture is authoritative for the faith and practice, thinking and living, of all men simply because it is an expression of divine authority, and divine authority entails ‘infallible truth.’ In the terse language of the Lord himself: ‘The scripture cannot be broken’ (John 10:35). The Scriptures are an infallible rule because they are infallibly true, or inerrant, in that they are inspired of God.⁷ There are many objective arguments whereby they are evidenced to be from God, but the full subjective assurance of their infallible truthfulness is wrought in the believer by the Holy Spirit testifying by means of the written Word (I, v). The divine authority and infallibility of Scripture rests not with any translation but with the original texts of the Hebrew Old Testament and the Greek New Testament,

6. See Warfield, *Inspiration and Authority*, 131 ff, 245 ff., for the meaning of this dictum.

7. Cf. J. B. Green, *A Harmony of the Westminster Presbyterian Standards*, 1951, 21: ‘The Scripture is authoritative just to the extent that it is true; and it is true just to the extent that it is the word of God.’ Green’s *Harmony* is a very helpful tool in the study of the Westminster Standards. For an excellent discussion of the nature of Biblical inerrancy (as well as many other aspects of the doctrine of inspiration), see E.J. Young, *Thy Word Is Truth*, 1957, 113 ff.

which are not only immediately inspired by God but preserved in essential purity by His providential care. So that, 'in all controversies of religion, the Church is finally to appeal unto them.'⁸ Nevertheless, the Bible is to be translated into the popular language of every nation on earth so that all may become acquainted with the content of the Word of God with a view to their worshipping Him in spirit and in truth (I, viii).

As for the *interpretation* of Scripture, everything in the Bible is not equally clear in itself nor to all.

Yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation, are so clearly propounded, and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them. . . . The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself: and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly (I, vii, ix).

As already mentioned, the locus of authority in the church rests with the original texts of Scripture by virtue of their immediate inspiration by God the Holy Spirit. In apostolic language: 'Holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Ghost' (II Pet. 1:21).⁹ Therefore: 'The supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture' (I, x). This is obviously the case because such pronouncements of men, while helpful,

8. The RPCES makes the position more explicit in its particular form of the first ordination question: 'Do you acknowledge the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the Word of God, *inerrant in the original writings*, the only infallible rule of faith and practice?' *Form of Government of the Reformed Presbyterian Church* (Evangelical Synod), 1967, 43 (FG V, 3).

9. Assumed, of course, is the apostolic authorship of II Peter. For a brief, but incisive, discussion of this whole passage in II Peter 1, see R. L. Harris, *The Inspiration and Canonicity of the Bible*, 1957, 63 f. This book is an excellent defense of the Presbyterian position on the Bible.

may err; whereas the Scripture, because the voice of the Holy Spirit, cannot err.¹⁰

An excellent summary statement of perhaps the most crucial aspects of the formal principle of Presbyterianism is that adopted in 1806 by the old Reformed Presbyterian Church in America:

There is a variety in the style and manner in which different parts of the Bible are written: The sacred penmen used means of information, and employed different talents, and peculiar modes of expression; but in all they wrote, they were infallibly guided, as to matter and manner, by the Holy Ghost. Translations may be imperfect; but the genuine text of the Old Testament in Hebrew, and the New Testament in Greek, is infallible. The Holy Ghost, speaking in the Scriptures, is the supreme Judge in all matters of religion.¹¹

The Presbyterian finds the *form* of sound doctrine in the Scriptures and this form he reveres not primarily for its own sake as given by God, but because it expresses and guards the *matter* of divine doctrine. He is not like the apostate Jews who in their reverence for the form of Scripture missed out on its matter (John 5:39 f). His formal principle is so important because it leads to and protects his material principle. What is this material principle? What is the content of Scripture? In the words of the Catechisms, ‘*What do the Scriptures principally teach?*’ This content is summarized in general terms as ‘what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man’ (WSC Q. 3; WLC Q. 5). Thus we see that both the material and the practical principles of Presbyterianism are derived from its formal principle, and that its practical principle in turn flows from its material principle. Scripture authoritatively determines the content of man’s faith and duty, and the content of man’s duty is Scripturally determined by means of the content of his faith.

10. WCF XXX, iv, reads: ‘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.’

11. *RPE* III, 6.

The Westminster Confession of Faith speaks in Chapter I of the content of Scripture in terms of Paul's phrase 'all the counsel of God' (Acts 20:27); 'The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit or traditions of men.' This is the case because Scripture embodies the material principle of Christianity—namely, 'the faith which was once delivered unto the saints' (Jude 3). 'Nevertheless, we acknowledge . . . that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the Church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed' (I, vi). In like manner Scripture sets the framework for the practical life of the believer in the Church not only by virtue of its doctrine, whether explicit or implicit, but also by virtue of general rules laid down for guidance through their application to specific circumstances.

The Westminster Standards attempt to summarize the main features of the whole counsel of God in accordance with this formal principle as expressed in Chapter I of the Confession. The remainder of the Confession, along with much of the Catechisms, is concerned with setting forth a summary of what the Christian of every era is to confess as his faith.

The Confession of Faith

The second question traditionally put to the candidate for ordination is: 'Do you sincerely receive and adopt the Confession of Faith of this Church, as containing the *system of doctrine* taught in the Holy Scriptures?'¹² The first two

12. *Constitution, loc. cit. Cf. RPE, 137*, for the second question in the old RPCGS: 'Do you acknowledge the doctrines of the Westminster Confession of

ordination questions are put separately not to minimize the Confession but to magnify the Scriptures as the sole source and sanction of the doctrine confessed by the Presbyterian Church.

Historic Presbyterian Churches are therefore confessional Churches, that is, they hold to a statement of faith which claims to be an accurate summary of the chief doctrines of the Bible. This statement is to be found in the *Westminster Confession of Faith* together with the Larger and Shorter Catechisms which expound its teaching. This Confession is not considered to be infallible. The church officer is not required to assent to every proposition in it, but only to the *system* of doctrine taught therein. This, however, does not mean that subscription to this specific system is to be watered down to belief in the general substance of what the Confession teaches.¹³ At the same time it should be noted that only the officers of the church are required to subscribe to the Confession; all that is required of church members is a credible profession of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

What, then, is the system of doctrine taught in the Confession? This is not the place to answer this question in any detail, but simply to suggest that it is that great Scriptural system of coherent doctrine which the Apostle Paul calls ‘the Gospel of God’ (Rom. 1:1), and to make a few summary

Faith, the Catechisms, Larger and Shorter, and Reformation Principles Exhibited, the Testimony of the Church—as embodying, according to the word of God, the great principles of the Covenanted Presbyterian Reformation, to the maintenance of which this Church is obliged by solemn covenant engagements?’ The RPCES expands the question as follows: ‘Do you sincerely receive and adopt the doctrinal standards of this church, the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, and *Catechisms, Larger and Shorter*, as embodying the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures, to the maintenance of which this church is bound before God by solemn obligation?’ (FG V, 3).

13. C. Hodge, *Discussions in Church Polity*, 1878, 317 ff. This work contains the views of the great Princeton theologian on ecclesiology in general and church government in particular. On this point Hodge expounds the traditional position of the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., which is also that of the RPCES. The old Reformed Presbyterian Church demanded subscription to ‘the whole doctrine’ of the Confession and Catechisms, not only of church officers but of every church member (see Ch. II).

remarks concerning this evangelical system of teaching. We may summarize this system in terms of three essential aspects—the Catholic, the Calvinistic, and the Covenant:

The first essential aspect of the system of doctrine taught in the Confession of Faith is the *Catholic* aspect. We might call this the formal aspect in that the other aspects presuppose it. This Catholic aspect refers to those doctrines which comprise traditional Trinitarian Christianity expressed in the ancient creeds of the church—involving confidence in the Scriptures and such evident Scriptural teachings as the deity, humanity, and resurrection of Christ, heaven and hell, and so forth. The Presbyterian system of doctrine presupposes Catholic Christianity; it is significant that the Confession's chapter on the Trinity immediately follows its chapter on Scripture. The Westminster Standards exude throughout the Scriptural, Christ-centered side of the atmosphere of the old catholic church. For example, we note these breathtaking words: 'The only Redeemer of God's elect is the Lord Jesus Christ, who, being the eternal Son of God, became man, and so was, and continueth to be, God and man in two distinct natures and one person, for ever' (WSC Q. 21).

The second cardinal aspect of the system of doctrine is the *Calvinistic* or Reformed one. It may be called the material aspect in that it is the heart of the system. Now Calvinism has many facets, but the touchstone of them all is a passion for God's honor and glory (*cf.* WSC Q. 1). However, God who is to be glorified is sovereign, and they who would honor Him can only do so by recognizing His sovereignty both in its indicative and imperative aspects. God as sovereign Lord has not only the right to command men but the power to compel them. The basic outlook of the Calvinist is well expressed in that word of the Apostle Peter: 'Who was I that I could withstand God?' (Acts 11:17).¹⁴

The distinctive stress of Calvinism is the sovereignty of

14. *Cf.* B. B. Warfield, *Calvin and Augustine*, 1956, 288 f.

God in the indicative sense, and this sovereignty in turn has two aspects: God's sovereignty as Creator and as Saviour.¹⁵

God's sovereignty as Creator is summarily expressed in the Confession:

God from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass: yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures; nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established (III, i).

All of created reality is comprehended within the eternal plan of a purposeful Creator.¹⁶ In the language of the Apostle: Things are foreordained 'according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his will.' They fall out 'according to the eternal purpose which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord' (Eph. 1:11; 3:11).

Now this purpose is a redemptive purpose—which leads to a few remarks about God's sovereignty as Saviour. Reformed teaching lays particular stress upon the sovereignty of God in the salvation of sinners: God the Son died to save from hell, and God the Holy Spirit regenerates, only those sinners whom God the Father has in love elected. As otherwise expressed: 'Election, redemption, and the application thereof, are of equal extent, for the elect only.'¹⁷

This distinctive teaching may be summarized in the traditional five points of Calvinism clearly formulated in response to the challenge of Arminianism: 1) the sinner's utter inability to save himself; 2) God's unconditional election of some sinners to salvation; 3) Christ's death to save those whom the Father has given him; 4) the irresistible power of God's saving

15. For a helpful introduction to the subject of God's sovereignty from a Biblical standpoint, see J. Murray, *The Sovereignty of God*, 1965.

16. For discussion of the nature of God's decrees, see, e.g., C. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, I, 535 ff.; J. O. Buswell, *Systematic Theology*, I, 163 ff.

17. Article I of the *Basis of Union of 1782*, on which the Associate Reformed Church was formed. See R. E. Thompson, *A History of the Presbyterian Churches in the United States*, 1895, 347. The appendix of this work contains many of the key documents of American Presbyterian history through the 19th century.

grace in conversion, or ‘the believer born of almighty grace’;¹⁸ and 5) the final perseverance in Christian faith and life of those who are truly born again.¹⁹

Each one of these points could be explained and illustrated from many portions of the Westminster Standards, but the following statement alludes to all five:

As God hath appointed the elect unto glory, so hath He, by the eternal and most free purpose of His will, foreordained all the means thereunto. Wherefore, they who are elected, being fallen in Adam, are redeemed by Christ, are effectually called unto faith in Christ by His Spirit working in due season, are justified, adopted, sanctified, and kept by His power, through faith, unto salvation. Neither are any other redeemed by Christ, effectually called, justified, adopted, sanctified, and saved, but the elect only’ (III, vi).

With respect to these distinctively Reformed doctrines, it should ever be kept in mind that they are *not* the sum and substance of Presbyterian doctrine. The true Presbyterian believes the whole Bible, the whole counsel of God; but it is precisely because he believes the whole Bible that he believes in these doctrines of grace. They are simply what the Bible taken as a whole teaches. They are simply the consistent outworking of the reply which every true Christian must give to Paul’s question: ‘Who maketh thee to differ . . . and what hast thou that thou didst not receive?’ (I Cor. 4:7).

The third essential aspect of the Confession’s system of doctrine has to do with its *Covenant* theology. It may be called the practical aspect in that it sets forth the framework of the believer’s life in relation to God and the church. In

18. Title of a famous sermon by the noted Southern Presbyterian theologian, R. L. Dabney, *Discussions*, I, 1890, 482-495.

19. For a good introductory study of these five points, see D. N. Steele and C. C. Thomas, *The Five Points of Calvinism, Defined, Defended, Documented*, 1963. For a substantial account of Calvinism in its many facets from the standpoint of the old Princeton tradition, see L. Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, 1932. See J. H. Thornwell, *Election and Reprobation*, 1961, for an excellent account of these particular doctrines. For various aspects of their relationship to the preaching of the Gospel, see J. Murray and N. B. Stonehouse, *The Free Offer of the Gospel*, n. d. This pamphlet is reprinted from the *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*, 1948, Appendix, 51-63.

brief, all of God's dealings with the human race are in terms of the Scriptural concept of a divine covenant, that is, an arrangement imposed by God on man entailing solemn obligations on both sides. Of these sovereign impositions there are two basic ones: the covenant of works with Adam and all his posterity in him; and the covenant of grace with Christ, as the second Adam, and all the elect in him (WLC Q. 31).

With regard to the former we read: 'God gave to Adam a law, as a covenant of works, by which He bound him and all his posterity, to personal, entire, exact, and perpetual obedience, promised life upon the fulfilling, and threatened death upon the breach of it, and endued him with power and ability to keep it' (WCF XIX, i; *cf.* VII, i ff). However, mankind in Adam was unfaithful to this arrangement, so God instituted another: 'God doth not leave all men to perish in the estate of sin and misery, into which they fell by the breach of the first covenant, commonly called the Covenant of Works; but of his mere love and mercy delivereth his elect out of it, and bringeth them into an estate of salvation by the second covenant, commonly called the Covenant of Grace' (WLC Q. 30). As noted the covenant of grace is a redemptive covenant. In the language of Scripture: 'He sent redemption unto his people: he hath commanded his covenant for ever' (Ps. 111: 9). The covenant of grace is administered in two basic dispensations: the old covenant which was preparatory and the new which is final. While the administration of these two covenants differ, the covenant of grace is fundamentally the same in every dispensation (WCF VII, v, vi).²⁰

Under this covenant of grace, especially as administered in the dispensation of the new covenant, the practical life of the Christian is centered in the covenant life of the visible church governed by presbyters according to Scriptural principles.

20. WCF VII, vi, reads: 'There are not therefore two covenants of grace, differing in substance, but one and the same, under various dispensations.' *Cf.* WLC QQ. 32 ff. For a helpful introduction to the subject from a thoroughly Biblical standpoint, see J. Murray, *The Covenant of Grace*, 1954.

Presbyterian Church Life

The remaining ordination questions suggest the practical principle of Presbyterianism in that they deal with the life of the church. For instance, one must promise to study the peace and purity of the church. Traditionally, the candidate for the ministry must promise to submit to his brethren in the Lord and ‘to be zealous and faithful in maintaining the truths of the gospel, and the purity and peace of the Church,’ whatever persecution or opposition may arise unto him on this account.²¹ Particular emphasis is laid upon distinctively Presbyterian principles of church government. For instance, the third question put to candidates for ordination in the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod, is: ‘Do you acknowledge the Lord Jesus Christ as the only Redeemer and Head of His church, and do you accept the Presbyterian form of Church Government as derived from the Holy Scriptures?’²²

The practical principle of Presbyterianism may be set forth in brief in terms of covenant life in the church presbyterian. Life under the covenant of grace, while not life under the law as a covenant of works, is life under God’s moral law as summarized in the ten commandments (WCF XIX, i-iii). This law is to govern the life of the believer by way of rigorous application to every area of life (WSC QQ. 39 ff; WLC QQ. 91 ff.). It involves, for example, strict observance of the fourth and fifth commandments regarding the Sabbath on

21. *Constitution*, 379 f. (FG XV, xii).

22. FG V, 3. Cf. *RPE*, 137-139, for the remaining questions put to all presbyters. *E.g.*, Q. 3: ‘Do you acknowledge that the Lord Jesus Christ, the only Redeemer and Head of his Church, has appointed one permanent form of ecclesiastical government; and that this form is, by divine right, Presbyterian?’ And Q. 7: ‘Do you promise, in the strength of divine grace, to rule well your own house—to live a holy and exemplary life—to watch faithfully over the members of this Church—to exhort with meekness and long-suffering—to visit the sick and afflicted—and to attend punctually the meetings of the Presbytery [or Session], and of the superior judicatories, when called thereunto, judging faithfully in the house of God?’

the one hand and family and church life on the other (WLC QQ. 115 ff., 123 ff.; WCF XXI).

Indeed, covenant life involves family worship in the church. For the church as the covenant people of God includes not only believers but their children. For this reason the children of believers under the new covenant are to be baptized as a sign and seal of their initiation into the covenant of grace and the church of the Lord Jesus Christ (WCF XXVIII, i, iv; WLC QQ. 165 f; WSC QQ. 94 f).²³ The language of the old Reformed Presbyterians regarding the church constituted by the first family expresses the Presbyterian view of the church in any age:

Not only are the saints interested in the covenant of grace, but the Church, as a visible Society, is a *Covenant Society*. The visible Church, thus erected as a Covenant Society, waits for the accomplishment of the promise of God, in the use of the instituted means of grace. The children are included with the parents of the ecclesiastical covenant; the Sabbath is observed, and sacrifices are offered.²⁴

Before setting forth presbyterian principles of church government, it would be well to summarize the Presbyterian view of the church.

The universal, invisible church consists of all God's elect through the ages. The universal, visible church consists of all those throughout the world who profess the true religion, together with their children. To this universal, visible church God has given His word, ministry, and ordinances for the gathering and perfecting of the saints. This universal church is sometimes more and sometimes less visible. Her member

23. For recent discussions of the Biblical and Presbyterian doctrine of Baptism, see J. Murray, *Christian Baptism*, 1972; R. G. Rayburn, *What About Baptism?*, 1957; K. A. Homer, *The Biblical Basis of Infant Baptism* (Pamphlet). For an excellent historical study, see L. B. Schenck, *The Presbyterian Doctrine of Children in the Covenant: A Historical Study of the Significance of Infant Baptism in the Presbyterian Church in America*, 1940.

24. *Reformation Principles Exhibited By the Reformed Presbyterian Church in the United States of America* (Part I, A Brief Historical View of the Church As a Visible Society in Covenant With God), 1892, 20. Of course, under the new covenant the sacrifices are offered in a metaphorical sense (*cf.* Heb. 13:10-17).

churches are more or less pure depending on the measure of purity in their doctrine, worship, and discipline (WCF XXV, i-iv). ‘The purest Churches under heaven are subject both to mixture and error; and some have so degenerated, as to become no Churches of Christ, but synagogues of Satan. Nevertheless, there shall always be a Church on earth, to worship God according to his will’ (XXV, v).

Upon the command of God, every believer is obligated to be under the discipline of some true member of the visible church.²⁵ The Lord has not left this church without government. ‘The Lord Jesus, as King and Head of His Church, hath therein appointed a government in the hand of Church officers, distinct from the civil magistrate’ (WCF XXX, i). To these officers has been given the authority to govern the church by means of the ministry of the Gospel and church discipline (XXX, ii). These officers of particular churches are responsible to assemble in synod or councils for the purpose of settling controversies of faith, exercising discipline, and governing the church in general. The decisions of these assemblies, if agreeable to the Word of God, are to be received with reverence and submission, not only because they are agreeable to Scripture but because Scripture authorizes and sanctions church government (XXXI, i-iii). At the same time it is true that ‘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’ (XXXI, iv).

Now with respect to distinctively Presbyterian principles of church government, they may be set forth as follows:

Under the rule of Christ the government of the Church must be conducted decently and in order. ‘It is absolutely necessary that the government of the Church be exercised

25. See FG (RPCES) I, 1 ff. The RPCES view of the visible church is summarized at the beginning of the FG; its views of church government are found throughout.

under some certain and definite form.’²⁶ This certain and definite form is simply this: the Church is to be governed by the representatives of local congregations, namely elders of equal rank, sitting in representative assemblies of increasing authority. Here we see at work three basic principles of church government.

The first is the right of church members to ‘a substantive part in the government of the Church.’²⁷ Church authority is finally vested not in the clergy, but in the whole church, that is, Christian people. However, this authority is not exercised by the people directly but through their elected representatives.

This leads us to the second principle, namely, rule by presbyters of equal authority as the highest officers of the Church. These presbyters are of two sorts, those which are primarily ruling elders and those which are not only ruling elders but also teaching elders (I Tim. 5:17). The former are those ‘laymen’ elected by local congregations who are in basic agreement with the doctrinal and ecclesiastical standards of the church. The latter are ‘clergymen’ ordained to the ministry by a regional body of ruling and teaching elders known as a presbytery.

The third general principle is the government of the Church by means of a graded series of church courts of ascending authority. These judicatories—which may exercise

26. *Constitution*, 358 (FG VIII, i).

27. C. Hodge, [What Is Presbyterianism?](#), 1855, 6. The three basic principles of Presbyterian church government are set forth by Hodge on this and the following pages of this little work on church government. Cf. C. Hodge, *Church Polity*, 1878, 119: ‘The fundamental principles of our Presbyterian system are first, the parity of the clergy; second, the right of the people to a substantive part in the government of the Church; and third, the unity of the Church, in such sense, that a small part is subject to a larger, and a larger to the whole.’ It should *not* be inferred from these references to Hodge that either the author, or all Presbyterians would endorse all his views on church government. His basic analysis of presbyterian principles is set forth here as representing, on the whole, the viewpoint of the RPCES. For discussions of church government by men within the RPCES, see K. A. Horner, *Biblical Church Government*, 1963; and the pamphlet by R. H. Cox, ‘Decency and Order—Scriptural Church Polity.’ See also *The Form of Presbyterian Church-Government in the Westminster Standards (Confession, 397-416)*.

executive and judicial powers—are composed of elders alone. They are representative assemblies, which in their most developed form involve the local church *session* (or congregational presbytery), the regional *presbytery*; the provincial *synod*, and the general *assembly* (or general synod). In this system the local church is represented in the session, the session in the presbytery, and the presbytery in the synod.

This third principle presupposes a deep concern for the unity of the visible Church and is thus opposed to independency both in spirit and form of church government—that is, the doctrine that each local congregation is to be a law unto itself with no church authority over it. To the Presbyterian an independent church is as much a contradiction in terms as an independent Christian.²⁸

Such in broadest outline is Presbyterian church government. It tries to safeguard both individual liberty and corporate order. The Presbyterian believes that the essential principles of this system are to be found in Scripture, while making no pretense of finding there all the details that have been worked out from these principles.²⁹ At the same time he does not maintain that the Presbyterian Church is the only true church, or that only those churches organized on Presbyterian principles are true churches. Moreover, church government is not an end in itself, but simply a means to an end, namely, that evangelical purpose for which the Church exists in the world. Finally, it must never be lost sight of that the Church is at bottom a theocracy, to be under the final authority of God through His Spirit and Word.

The Presbyterian Church

In summary, we may say that the Presbyterian is God-centered in that his life is based upon the character and the

28. *Ibid.*, 66: ‘An independent church is as much a solecism as an independent Christian, or as an independent finger of the human body, or as an independent branch of a tree.’

29. *Cf. ibid.*, 80: ‘We do not regard it [*i.e.*, presbyterian church govern-

revelation of the great triune God revealed in Scripture. His authority is the Bible; his confession, the Gospel; and his life, the Church. These, in a nutshell, are the three great principles of historic Presbyterianism. It is Catholic in consciousness, Protestant in basis, Reformed in doctrine, and distinctively Presbyterian in life. Thus, from an historical perspective, we may say that the Presbyterian Church is Catholic, Protestant, and Reformed, as well as distinctively Presbyterian.

The Presbyterian Church is *Catholic* in the sense that it holds to the historic creeds of the old catholic church. It is *Protestant* (or Evangelical) in that it holds to the three basic principles of the Reformation: the absolute authority of Scripture alone, salvation by pure grace through faith alone, and the universal priesthood of believers. It is *Reformed* (or Calvinistic) in that it holds to the Reformed system of doctrine over against what it considers less consistent Protestant counterparts—whether Lutheranism, Arminianism, or Anabaptism.

Within the Reformed tradition historic Presbyterianism draws from both the Orthodoxy of the Continent and the Puritanism of the British Isles. That is, it is *Orthodox* in that it holds substantially to that classical Reformed theology formulated in the seventeenth century. Not that this system of doctrine is the last word on what the Bible teaches, but that its content is substantially the doctrine of Scripture; so that whatever progress is to be made in the formulation of doctrine, it must be made within the general framework of classic Reformed Orthodoxy.³⁰ Historic Presbyterianism is permeated with the spirit of Orthodoxy, that is, a deep concern to maintain a precise witness to right doctrine.

Presbyterianism also draws from the *Puritan* tradition which maintains that to be truly orthodox the teaching of

ment] as a skillful product of human wisdom; but as a divine institution, founded on the word of God, and as the genuine product of the inward life of the Church.’

30. Cf. B. B. Warfield, ‘The Idea of Systematic Theology’ in *Studies in Theology*, 1932, 74 ff.

Scripture must be constantly and consistently applied in the worship and experience of the Church. The practical application of the truth to one's behavior is paramount. There must not only be precise doctrine but precise duty; indeed, strict doctrine demands strict duty. Thus in Presbyterianism we see the distinctly Puritan emphasis on the law of God, reverence for the Sabbath, simplicity of worship, aggressive evangelism, and practical theology. Historic Presbyterianism is in general permeated with the Puritan concern for purity of doctrine and especially purity of life.

Finally, Presbyterianism is first and foremost *Christian*. It professes to be nothing more or less than the consistent Christianity of the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures. It is Christian first and all these others second. It is Catholic, Protestant, and Reformed precisely because it is Christian, and not vice versa. Presbyterianism is Reformed because it is Christian, and not Christian because it is Reformed. It seeks the realization of the Orthodox and Puritan vision precisely because it seeks to be consistently Christian; the quest for orthodoxy and purity are the outgrowth of the passion to follow Christ.³¹

But, alas, Presbyterianism in practice is very often less than it claims to be in theory. This fact will certainly be borne out by the history behind the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod.

31. For an interesting discussion, along somewhat different lines, of Presbyterianism in its historical relations, see C. A. Briggs, *American Presbyterianism: Its Origin and Early History*, 1885, Ch. I, 'The Rise of Presbyterianism in Europe' (1-47).