

The Presbyterian Church in America Non-hierarchical Presbyterianism

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The Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) was founded in 1973 as a denomination with the vision to be “Faithful to the Scriptures, True to the Reformed Faith, and Obedient the Great Commission.” The PCA was begun by Ruling Elders and Ministers who had sought over two generations to reverse trends in our former denominational connection which we believed to be (1) a departure from the evangelical Reformed Faith and (2) an emergence of an increasingly coercive denominational church polity.¹ So the PCA emerged because of both theological and church governance issues.

Church polity is based not only on explicit scriptural teachings, but also on biblical principles, biblical precedents, common sense, Christian prudence, and historical-circumstantial factors (*Westminster Confession of Faith* I-6).² All of these have affected the PCA’s polity, which has resulted in a grass-roots Presbyterianism.

There is a significant difference between the PCA’s Presbyterian polity and the polity of hierarchical Churches. In an hierarchical Church such as the Roman Catholic Church there is “canon law” which deals in great detail about what is to be done in numerous

¹ For personal accounts of some “founding fathers” regarding the beginnings of the PCA, detailing examples of these two roots causes for establishing the PCA, see *How the Gold Has Become Dim*, Morton H. Smith. Greenville, SC: Greenville Theological Seminary Press, 1973; *I Am Reminded*, Kennedy Smartt, privately published, 1998; *To God All Praise and Glory*, Paul G. Settle. Atlanta: PCA Administrative Committee, 1998; and *Hitherto: A Biographical Testimony*, Harold Borchert, n.d., privately published. All are available from the PCA Christian Education and Publications Bookstore, www.cepbookstore.com.

² “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. Nevertheless, we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word: and that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the Church, [emphasis added] 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.” The Westminster Confession of Faith is the doctrinal Standard of the PCA. It was originally written by the Westminster Assembly in London 1643-1648, was adopted by the Church of Scotland (Presbyterian) shortly thereafter. It was adopted by colonial Presbyterians in America in 1729 (with a few revisions) and adopted by the PCA in 1973.

situations. In a Church with Episcopal polity (ruled by bishops), bishops exercise ecclesiastical authority over churches and often hold title to local church property.

One of the features of the Protestant Reformation was the restoration of Presbyterian church governance in a number of Continental Reformed Churches and in the Church of Scotland. The Church of Scotland became the Mother Church of Presbyterian Churches around the world. It is the understanding of a number of historical theologians that the Church of the First and Second Centuries had a Presbyterian governance, but the Church developed an Episcopal governance by the mid-Second Century due to several circumstantial factors.³ But within Presbyterianism there have been, and still are, two perspectives; an hierarchal, top-down view and a non-hierarchal, bottom-up view. These two different perspectives were evident at the Westminster Assembly.⁴ When colonial Presbyterians organized as a General Assembly in 1789 they adapted Presbyterian church governance to the free church situation in America, in contrast to the state church system in the Britain and Europe. Additionally, the first American General Assembly adopted some Preliminary Principles authored by John Witherspoon.⁵ Those preliminary

³ For a biblical-exegetical and historical argument that the Church of the First and Second Centuries had a Presbyterian polity carried over from the Old Testament and synagogue system, see J. B. Lightfoot, *St. Paul's Epistle to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1953, reprint of 1913 edition), 181-269. Dr. Lightfoot was the Anglican Bishop of Durham in the 19th century as well as a New Testament and Patristic scholar at Cambridge University. For an explanation of the factors producing the episcopacy from the mid-Second Century forward, see L. Roy Taylor, "Presbyterianism" in *Who Runs the Church: Four Views on Church Government* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing Company, 2004).

⁴ For an account of the origins and development of these two types of Presbyterianism in The British Isles and America, see Paul R. Gilchrist, *Distinctives of Biblical Presbyterianism* (Atlanta: World Reformed Fellowship, 2002). Gilchrist demonstrates that an hierarchal, top-down, aristocratic Presbyterianism was advocated by some commissioners to the Westminster Assembly (ex. Samuel Rutherford and Robert Baillie) in response to the advocacy of Congregationalism by a few commissioners who later became Congregationalists. But a non-hierarchal, bottom-up, democratic types of Presbyterianism was the practice of Continental Reformed Churches and advocated by some Westminster commissioners such as George Gillespie and Alexander Henderson. Moreover, the Church of Scotland established a General Assembly first, then Presbyteries, then congregations. In colonial America the process was the opposite, congregations first, then Presbyteries, then synods, and finally a General Assembly. Presbyterianism in America was more of a grass-roots movement.

⁵ The Rev. John Witherspoon was the first President of the College of New Jersey (Princeton University), the only clergyman to sign the Declaration of Independence. The by-word in England concerning the American Revolution, "The Americans have run off with a Presbyterian parson," referred to Witherspoon's influence. Several of the Founding Fathers of the American Republic were his students at Princeton (ex. James Madison) who were involved in the development of the Constitution of the United States and the writing of the Federalist Papers urging the adoption of the Constitution. There are several parallels between the Presbyterian governance adopted by the First American Presbyterian General Assembly and the U.S. Constitution. These "Preliminary Principles" are:

1. God alone is Lord of the conscience and has left it free from any doctrines or commandments of men (a) which are in any respect contrary to the Word of God, or (b) which, in regard to matters of faith and worship, are not governed by the Word of God. Therefore, the rights of private judgment in all matters that respect religion are universal and inalienable. No religious constitution should be supported by the civil power further than may be necessary for protection and security equal and common to all others.
2. In perfect consistency with the above principle, 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

principles espoused a *non-hierarchal*, bottom-up, from-the-ground-up, democratic Presbyterianism.

As we see it, over the years the larger Presbyterian Church (now called the Presbyterian Church, USA) underwent a metamorphosis from a democratic type of Presbyterianism into an hierarchal Presbyterianism. *The Book of Church Order* of the Presbyterian Church, USA is now written as “church law” and is stated in much greater detail than the BCO of the PCA because the PCUSA is hierarchal Presbyterianism with the emphasis on the higher courts of the Church directing the lower courts. The PCUSA BCO deals much more extensively with detailed procedures covering a wide variety of situations. Therefore, the PC(USA) *BCO* is much longer than the PCA BCO. Moreover, in recent civil court cases regarding disputes over local church property the PCUSA argues that the PCUSA is an hierarchal church with the Presbytery being tantamount to a bishop.

By contrast, the PCA is a *non-hierarchal*, grass-roots type of Presbyterianism. One of the major reasons for the formation of the PCA was to revert to a democratic Presbyterianism. The PCA BCO is written more *as a set of principles*, emphasizing the use of discretion and wisdom by the lower courts. The “Preface” of the BCO lists “The Preliminary Principles” that are not merely an introductory statement to the constitution

its internal government which Christ has appointed. In the exercise of this right it may, notwithstanding, err in making the terms of communion either too lax or too narrow; yet even in this case, it does not infringe upon the liberty or the rights of others, but only makes an improper use of its own.

3. Our blessed Saviour, for the edification of the visible Church, which is His body, has appointed officers not only to preach the Gospel and administer the Sacraments, but also to exercise discipline for the preservation both of truth and duty. 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.
4. Godliness is founded on truth. A test of truth is its power to promote holiness according to our Saviour's rule, "By their fruits ye shall know them" (Matthew 7:20). No opinion can be more pernicious or more absurd than that which brings truth and falsehood upon the same level. On the contrary, 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.
5. While, under the conviction of the above principle, it is necessary to make effective provision that all who are admitted as teachers be sound in the faith, there are truths and forms with respect to which men of good character and principles may differ. In all these it is the duty both of private Christians and societies to exercise mutual forbearance toward each other.
6. Though the character, qualifications and authority of church officers are laid down in the Holy Scriptures, as well as the proper method of officer investiture, the power to elect persons to the exercise of authority in any particular society resides in that society.
7. All church power, whether exercised by the body in general, or by representation, is only ministerial and declarative since the Holy Scriptures are the only rule of faith and practice. No church judicatory may make laws to bind the conscience. All church courts may err through human frailty, yet it rests upon them to uphold the laws of Scripture though this obligation be lodged with fallible men.
8. 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.

or historical information, but are an integral part of the constitution, or the lenses through which the rest of the BCO is to be viewed. It is not envisioned that the PCA BCO would have detailed instructions on virtually every situation. When faced with situations and circumstances that are not dealt with in detail in the PCA BCO, sessions and presbyteries should exercise their own wisdom and discretion within the parameters of biblical principles and the constitution of the PCA, particularly the “Preliminary Principles,” (the constitution is the *BCO* and the *Westminster Standards*).⁶ The voluntary nature of the PCA is explicitly stated in BCO 25-9; 25-10 regarding church property⁷ and in BCO 25-11 regarding the process of a local church’s withdrawing from the denomination.⁸ Both of these statements are consistent with the “Preliminary Principles.” In recent court cases involving employment law, the PCA successfully argued that as a *non-hierarchical denomination*, local church pastors and local church staff members are not employees of a Presbytery or the General Assembly.⁹ The PCA argued that the relationship of a PCA

⁶ The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church in America, which is subject to and subordinate to the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, the inerrant Word Of God, consists of its doctrinal standards set forth in the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, together with the *Larger and Shorter Catechisms*, and the *Book of Church Order*, comprising the Form of Government, the Rules of Discipline and the Directory for Worship; all as adopted by the Church (BCO, Preface, § III).

⁷ **25-9.** All particular churches shall be entitled to hold, own and enjoy their own local properties, without any right of reversion whatsoever to any Presbytery, General Assembly or any other courts hereafter created, trustees or other officers of such courts.

25-10. The provisions of this *BCO* 25 are to be construed as a solemn covenant whereby the Church as a whole promises never to attempt to secure possession of the property of any congregation against its will, whether or not such congregation remains within or chooses to withdraw from this body. All officers and courts of the Church are hereby prohibited from making any such attempt.

⁸ **25-11.** While a congregation consists of all the communing members of a particular church, and in matters ecclesiastical the actions of such local congregation or church shall be in conformity with the provisions of this *Book of Church Order*, nevertheless, in matters pertaining to the subject matters referred to in this *BCO* 25, including specifically the right to affiliate with or become a member of this body or a Presbytery hereof and the right to withdraw from or to sever any affiliation of connection with this body or any Presbytery hereof, action may be taken by such local congregation or local church in accordance with the civil laws applicable to such local congregation or local church; and as long as such action is taken in compliance with such applicable civil laws, then such shall be the action of the local congregation or local church.

It is expressly recognized that each local congregation or local church shall be competent to function and to take actions covering the matters set forth herein as long as such action is in compliance with the civil laws with which said local congregation or local church must comply, and this right shall never be taken from said local congregation or local church without the express consent of and affirmative action of such local church or congregation.

Particular churches need remain in association with any court of this body only so long as they themselves so desire. The relationship is voluntary, based upon mutual love and confidence, and is in no sense to be maintained by the exercise of any force or coercion whatsoever. [Emphasis added]. A particular church may withdraw from any court of this body at any time for reasons which seem to it sufficient.

⁹ See Susanne MacDonald vs. Grace Church, Seattle, Northwest Presbytery and the PCA, a Corporation, US District Court For the Western District of Washington at Seattle, and Federal Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals. The District Court ruled that the Presbytery and General Assembly are not the employers of local

minister to a Presbytery is analogous to that of a lawyer with a bar association. The bar association examines the lawyer regarding expertise and character, but a law firm, not the bar, is the attorney's employer.

So, the PCUSA represents itself as a hierarchal denomination; the PCA represents itself as a *non-hierarchal* denomination.

The PCA is non-hierarchal in that: (1) local churches, Presbyteries, and the General Assembly are distinct and separate civil entities and (2) the authority of the Church is moral and spiritual, ministerial and declarative. Two entire chapters of the BCO (Chapters 3 and 11) are devoted to that explanation. Yet the PCA is spiritually united (*not civilly* connected) and Presbyterian churches are inter-dependent, not independent.¹⁰ This connectionalism is expressed in our confessional theology, our system of government and discipline, and our cooperative ministry.¹¹ PCA founding fathers Cannada and Williamson so state in their book:

PCA church pastors of local PCA church staff. The ruling was upheld by the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals. Plaintiff filed six actions in various venues on the matter and did not prevail in any of them.

¹⁰ Note that I define a connectional Church as follows: "By 'connectional' we mean that local churches see themselves as part of the larger Church, that local churches are not independent but are accountable to the larger Church, and that local churches do not minister alone but in cooperation with the larger Church." (Taylor, *Who Runs the Church*, p. 75). Such a definition does not require or even imply that churches must be civilly connected in order to be connectional.

¹¹ **Doctrinal Fidelity:** No system of church polity can absolutely guarantee theological integrity among its ministers and office-bearers. Apostasy and heresy have cropped up in branches of the Church with all types of church government. Nevertheless, Presbyterian church polity has built-in safeguards that will work, *if* the system is faithfully followed. First, a Reformed-Presbyterian Church has a binding confessional doctrinal standard that is not just an advisory consensus statement. Second, the doctrinal standards of a Reformed-Presbyterian Church are derived from scripture, relying upon the Holy Spirit, benefiting from the wisdom of the theological consensus of the Church throughout the ages. Finally, ministers and office-bearers are required to adhere to the biblical system of doctrine for ordination and continued ministry.

Mutual Accountability: In a Church with a Presbyterian-representative-connectional system, there is mutual accountability not only in doctrinal integrity, but also for one's manner of life. Historically, the Reformed-Presbyterian Churches have regarded the "marks of the Church" to be (1) the faithful preaching of the Word, (2) the proper administration of the sacraments, and (3) the practice of discipline. In a Presbyterian system the members of the local church are accountable to the elders of that church, ministers and churches are accountable to the presbytery, and presbyteries are accountable to the general assembly. There are carefully detailed procedures to be followed, once a judicial process of discipline has been instituted. Moreover, there is the possibility of appeal to the larger Church, the Presbytery, or even the General Assembly.

Cooperative Ministry: To be a Presbyterian Church involves not only a mutual commitment to a confessional doctrinal standard and mutual accountability, but also a commitment to cooperative ministry. That is based on an ecclesiology which posits that the Church is more than the local church, that local churches ministering together as a regional Church or national Church can accomplish more in ministry than local churches ministering separately. Because the Church is a covenant community of the people of God, local churches are not independent, but interdependent, not only in doctrinal confessions and accountability, and in cooperative ministry. This is not to say that churches with other forms of church government cannot have effective cooperative ministries, but that for Presbyterians cooperative ministry is a matter of theological principle, not merely practical strategy. (Taylor. *Op. cit.* pp. 96-97).

The thing that is special about the PCA is that there is a clear and vital spiritual connection between the Congregations, the Presbyteries, and the General Assembly. Accordingly it is entirely proper to designate the polity of the PCA as being “connectional” as long as it is made clear that the connection is a spiritual connection between the Congregations, the Presbyteries and the General Assembly and there is no connection of any kind between the civil entities formed by them. The members of the Congregations, the Presbyteries and the General Assembly make up the membership of the respective civil entities formed by them and are, therefore, in complete control of those civil entities. *Accordingly, since there is a vital spiritual connection between the Congregations, the Presbyteries, and the General Assembly in the PCA and each has complete control of the civil entity formed by it, the PCA does not consist of a group of independent local churches that are free to teach and promote whatever they see fit.*¹²

When a person joins a congregation he voluntarily takes a vow to submit himself to the government and discipline of the church (*BCO 57-5.5*). When a ruling elder or deacon is ordained he vows to submit himself unto his brethren in the Lord (*BCO 24-5.5*) and affirms that he believes that the form of government and discipline of the PCA conform to general principles of biblical polity (*BCO 24-5.3*). Ministers take similar vows upon ordination (*BCO 21-5.3, 4*). When a local church is constituted as a church the congregation as a whole promises to operate on the principles of the faith and order [doctrine and church governance] of the PCA (*BCO 5-8.3*). When an existing congregation transfers into a PCA presbytery, the elders of the church, as representatives of the congregation, vow to uphold the doctrine and polity of the PCA (*BCO 13-8*).

When members, ruling elders, deacons and ministers take such vows they voluntarily place themselves under the *spiritual* authority of the Church. When ruling elders, deacons and ministers affirm that they believe that the form of government and discipline of the PCA conform to general principles of biblical polity, they voluntarily pledge themselves to exercise their office in accordance with the constitution of the PCA. Those who have taken such vows have a moral responsibility (though not a legal obligation) to abide by the decision, judgment or order of a church court of original jurisdiction, or they may carry the matter forward until a higher court decides it (*BCO 43* details the complaint process; *BCO 42* details the appeals process).¹³ By taking the vows of membership or ordination one agrees to abide by the authority of the court of original jurisdiction and higher courts as well because of the spiritual connectionalism of the Church (*BCO 11-3, 11-4*). Once the higher court has handled the matter finally, there is, because of the vows they have taken and theological beliefs they have espoused, a moral responsibility (though not a legal obligation) to abide by the final disposition of the matter as long as they are members of the PCA. A person may think that he cannot in

¹² Robert C. Cannada and W. Jack Williamson. *The Historic Polity of the PCA*. Pp. 34-35. (Italics in original).

¹³ In PCA parlance an appeal deals only with a person who has undergone an ecclesiastical trial; a complaint deals with all other constitutional irregularities.

good conscience accept the final disposition of the matter after the complaint or appellate process is complete, in which case he may leave the PCA without coercion.

It should be noted that all members, sessions, Presbyteries and the General Assembly of the PCA are morally obligated to follow the constitution of the PCA. Blind obedience, however, may not be required by any church officer or church court.¹⁴ Church courts that violate the constitution of the PCA may themselves be subject to ecclesiastical trial.¹⁵

Thus, the Presbyterian Church in America is Presbyterian (governed by elders elected by the people whom they represent), yet a democratic type of Presbyterianism; it is connectional, but non-hierarchical, in that the power of the Church is not civil or coercive but moral and spiritual, ministerial and declarative; it is constitutional not authoritarian, that is, all of her members, officers, and church courts are to operate within the framework of the constitution of the Church and may not resort to arbitrary use of ecclesiastical authority that is contrary to the Church constitution.

Interpretations of *The Book of Church Order*, *The Westminster Standards*, “The Rules of Assembly Operation,” “The Operating Manual of the Standing Judicial Commission,” and/or *Robert’s Rules of Order* by the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly of the PCA or staff members of the Office of the Stated Clerk are for information only and are not authoritative rulings that may only be made by the courts of the Church. The Office of the Stated Clerk does not represent parties in ecclesiastical judicial cases. Parties to potential cases or cases in process are responsible for their own constitutional and procedural knowledge and understanding. The Office of the Stated Clerk does not give legal advice. When legal advice is needed, professional legal counsel should be secured from one familiar with applicable laws and regulations.

¹⁴ *Westminster Confession of Faith* XX-II. 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; or beside it, if matters of faith, or worship. So that, to believe such doctrines, or to obey such commands, 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. [Emphasis added].

¹⁵ BCO 40-6. In process against a lower court, the trial shall be conducted according to the rules provided for process against individuals, so far as they may be applicable.