

PREFACE

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General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America

The second Stated Clerk of the General Assembly, Dr. Paul R. Gilchrist, who served in that position from 1988 to 1998, was directed by the Assembly to prepare a Digest of the Actions of the General Assembly. Under his editorship two volumes were produced, a Digest and a Supplement. Dr. Gilchrist had served as the last Stated Clerk of the General Synod of the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod before the RPCES joined and was received into the PCA in 1982. In 1998, I was elected as Stated Clerk of the General Assembly of the PCA in 1998 and will serve, *Deo volente*, through the General Assembly of 2020. In his capacity as Stated Clerk of the RPCES, Dr. Gilchrist had edited a summary of the actions of the General Synod of the RPCES. With the joining and receiving of the RPCES and PCA in 1982, the history of the RPCES was incorporated into the history of the PCA.

The preservation of documents has been significantly advanced by digital technology in recent decades. In fact, the *Minutes of the General Assembly* and other important documents are available online through the PCA Historical Center, pcahistory.org. Nevertheless, a Digest of Assembly actions will be helpful for one to sort through and interpret the actions of the General Assembly.

If there is a verse that describes Presbyterians, it is 1 Corinthians 14:40, “But all things should be done decently and in order.” Though the Apostle Paul wrote that summary statement as a principle in a context regarding worship, Presbyterians utilize that principle not only in worship but also in polity as well as in theology. The polity of the PCA is in the category of Presbyterian polity as distinguished from episcopal and congregational polities or other hybrid/pragmatic polities. As a category, Presbyterian polity is 1) **biblical** (having roots in the Old Testament [Numbers 11], the development of synagogues, and carried over into the New Testament [Acts 15], until the rise of nascent episcopacy in the middle of the second century AD, then renewed in the Reformation); 2) **representative** (led by elders [*presbuteroi*] chosen by the people of God); and, 3) **connectional** (in theology, discipline, and cooperative ministry).

The polity of the PCA is different from other Presbyterian denominations in several respects.

- The PCA is non-hierarchical, or grass-roots Presbyterianism. That is, authority flows from the bottom up (local church Sessions, Presbyteries, and the General Assembly) not from the top down (General Assembly, Presbyteries, and Sessions). The PCA is connectional ecclesiastically but not civilly, as has been attested by several civil court rulings.
- The PCA does not have the binding precedent of judicial cases as other Presbyterian denominations have. See *BCO* 14-7.
- The Committee on Constitutional Business does not make rulings (authoritative interpretations of the Constitution), but only offers its studied advice, which may or may not be accepted by the General Assembly.
- The PCA *Book of Church Order* is primarily written as a set of principles rather than detailed procedures for every possible situation. “Shall” or “must” in the *BCO* ordinarily indicates required procedures. “Should” or “ought” means highly recommended, but not required. “May” means church courts may use their discretion within biblical and constitutional parameters. Absent specific constitutional instructions (the Constitution of the PCA is the *Book of Church Order* and the Westminster Standards), Sessions and Presbyteries may use their discretion and are encouraged to do so.
- The Preliminary Principles, listed in the Preface of the *BCO*, provide the lenses through which the remainder of the *BCO* is to be understood.
- The PCA *BCO* 21-4.e and f include what is known as “Good-Faith Subscription” to the *Westminster Confession of Faith* and *Catechisms*. This is to be distinguished from “Strict Subscription” of some continental Reformed Churches whereby a minister affirms his agreement with every statement and/or proposition in the doctrinal standards of the denomination, and from “System Subscription” in some North American Presbyterian denominations whereby a minister promises simply to be informed and guided by the doctrinal standards of the denomination. In the PCA, a Presbytery is to decide whether each of the minister’s stated differences with the Westminster Standards is merely semantic, more than semantic but not “out of accord,” “hostile to the system” [of doctrine], or “striking at the vitals of religion.”

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The reader will notice that this Digest includes a section (PART IV) which has consciously been entitled “Study Committee Reports,” rather than “Position Papers,” an unofficial term often used informally. General Assembly Ad Interim Study Committee reports are “deliverances” of an Assembly: the opinion of the majority of the commissioners on a specific subject (*in thesi*) at a particular point in time. As noted in the Preface to Part V of the 1973-1998 *PCA Digest*: “Even when adopted, these papers and decisions reflect the pious advice of that particular General Assembly and have no constitutional force unless changes were adopted in the *Book of Church Order* or other standards of the Church.” The PCA does not have the “authoritative interpretation of the constitution” process of the PCUSA that is tantamount to changing the constitution. Binding changes to the PCA constitution (The *Book of Church Order* and the Westminster Standards) may only be made by following the process for amending the constitution specified in *BCO* 26-2; 26-3.

This current Digest has had a long history. In 2011 and 2012, the Administrative Committee reported that a Digest of General Assembly *Minutes* from 1999 to 2012/13 would be created. The economic downturn resulted in the Digest being delayed, but in 2014 the Administrative Committee announced that the Digest was once again underway. Because of the delay caused by the “Great Recession,” the decision was then made that the Digest should include minutes and actions of the General Assembly from the previous twenty years of the PCA from 1999 to 2018.

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