

# Where Were You In '82?

6<sup>th</sup> Sunday of 6

A History of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

Elder Arthur W. Ritter

Good morning and welcome to Sunday School this morning!

As a ruling elder and teacher today, **Grace and Peace to each of you** -- from the Spiritual Growth Commission of the First Presbyterian Church Session.

As the Moderator of the Presbytery of Nevada, **God be with you and greetings** from your 30 neighboring Presbyterian churches, worshipping fellowships, and specialized ministries – and from the 53 active and retired ministers who together, comprise the Presbytery of Nevada.

And as a Presbytery Commissioner to the Synod of the Pacific (of which our presbytery is a part), **welcome and enjoy God's Holy love** from the other 397 churches in the other 10 presbyteries of our Synod.

I give you this greeting from all three of these councils on our church – and from my heart.

16 - Boise  
16 – Eastern Oregon  
19 – Kendall  
20 - Stockton  
28 – San Joachin

**31 – Nevada**

45 – San Jose

38 – Sacramento

52 – Redwoods

72 – San Francisco

88 – Cascades

**427 - Synod**

## Equipping the Saints ...

- **Saturday, November 5<sup>th</sup> 2011** – 8:30am to 3:30pm
- First Presbyterian Church – Las Vegas!
- The Reverend Karl Travis, Guest Speaker, GA Council committee chair:

### **How To Integrate Generational Theory Into Leadership Formation**

- Plus -- five afternoon workshops!

Again – here is my advertisement for the Equipping event coming up pretty quick (its only two Saturdays away)– please sign up!

Should be easy to find – eh?

# Overview

- Peter's version of the run-up to 1982...
- Our Denomination's organizational history and its context
- The "my" stories – Nevada's story – FPC's story
- What has the Reunion done for us?
- And what do we believe ... now?
- **Where are we – and where are we going?**  
... **Take A Look!**

In our six week experience, we have been exploring these subjects together – but, alas, our journey draws to a close today.

But, we have the means to find and participate in what we might want to address in our next trip on our personal growth and maturity -- in the next block of Sunday School offerings.

The next "**Take a Look**" gathering will be next Sunday, October 30 in the social hall - in lieu of class.

Lynne Zenier has provided us with a sign-up sheet this morning – and she asks that we please volunteer to bring something for our continental breakfast next week (there are some suggestions on the sheet – its not a blank piece of paper!).

She has filled in the Breakfast Item column with some of the items she would encourage, and left some blank if you want to bring something different from her suggestions.

Lynne will pick up this list after class.

We also have some reminder slips with the date and space for you to write down and

remind **you** what you have offered to bring.

## Last Sunday ...

### **What has the Reunion done for us?**

- Changed the landscape of American Presbyterianism
- Created the largest Presbyterian denomination
- Created a “Big Tent” for a broad Presbyterian witness

### **What has the Reunion done *to* us?**

- Continuous internal debate
- Decline in membership – reasons
- Confusion over who and what we are / what we believe

Two weeks ago we ended on this slide – and last week we began with its review – and jumped off on the point of the last bullet – “confusion we might have over who and what we are – and what we believe.”

We noted that:

- if you had (or still have) some confusion over these issues -- welcome to the club! ... and
- if you had (or now have) no confusion over them – we promised to fix that.

Sadly, we didn’t finish last week, covering only the “belief” part of our constitution, so today we will continue where we left off ...

And, so you won’t be disappointed, we again make the same promise we made last week: if you still have no confusion, we will fix that today, by golly!



Recall, we addressed the **beliefs** of the Presbyterian church as they are described in the constitution of our church – specifically in the *Book of Confessions* (Constitution, Part I) ...

Today, we detail the corporate **practices** part of our church – again as they are described in our Constitution, this time -- Part II, the *Book of Order*.

Don't worry, this is a non-threatening class today -- I will stick to our *corporate practices* and avoid the personal practices of Presbyterians, like:

- sitting only in the back row in church and other public places,
- remaining detached from whatever is going on lest we be sucked into the emotion of the moment and actually raise our hands in prayer or praise, sing with full voice, or display our closet Republican leanings outside of the voting booth. (... come on -- in your heart you know its right...)

Rest assured, today we will be “decent and in order. “

Recall, last week, we talked about our “confession” of the truth – which we do in our worship service each Sunday:

- confessing the truth of our personal and corporate sin early in our service and

- confessing God's positive truth with the Apostles Creed – and last summer, with the Nicene Creed -- right after the pastor's prayer over our collected offerings.

We spent some time on the church's eleven constitutional confessions of God's positive truth -- about

- His nature,
- His relationship to His creation and to us, and
- our response to His interaction with His creation – and to His interaction with us in and in our now-fallen and sinful nature (and as the Holy Spirit may be changing us – in our regenerating state).

I hope that we saw why Pastor Jim reminds us ...

“... some of the most important words you will ever say begin with ‘I believe ...’”

For when we Christians make a confession, we say,

“This is what we most assuredly believe, regardless of what others may believe and regardless of the opposition, rejection, or persecution that may come to us for taking this stand.”

We learned that a confession of faith is an officially adopted statement that spells out a church's understanding of the meaning and implications of the one basic confession of the lordship of Christ.

Such statements have not always been called confessions. They have also been called creeds, symbols, formulas, definitions, declarations of faith, statements of belief, articles of faith, and other similar names. All these are different ways of talking about the same thing.

Such **strong beliefs** should **work out in practice** – and that is what we will address, today – in a corporate “polity” sense.

## POLITY ...

... lends an *air of dignity* to what otherwise  
would be a *disorganized brawl*

... brings *order out of chaos*

... it is *how we govern what we do*

First off, what is this **polity** thing? -- and -- What is the role of polity in the life of the Church?

Well, here are some working definitions of “polity” ...

Pause to read the slide

The first one is what the US Army thinks of its field artillery!

The next two are pretty good *conceptual* definitions ...

# Polity

**“God works through His people”**

... it is how we govern what we do.

... it is how we organize, order, manage, and lead human effort to:

- *accomplish the mission of the Church and*
- *achieve the vision of the Church*

Here are some more definitions of ‘polity’ – perhaps more useful to us ...

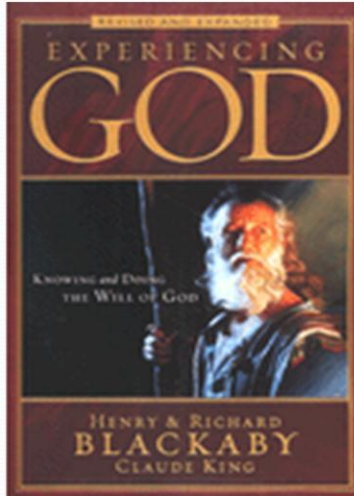
(Pause to allow the room to read the slide)

Well, **polity** is not the work of the Church;

... participating in the mission of God is the work of the Church.

... so, what is this “participating in God’s mission?”

## ... participating in God's mission ...



- **God** pursues a continuing love relationship with you
- **God** is always at work around you – and He invites you to join Him in what He is doing
- **You** must make adjustments in your life to join God in what He is doing ...



Well, I am not here to sell you on Henry Blackaby's great study on discerning God's will – and we won't debate its merits here, either; but, *Experiencing God* is probably the best summary of the many biblical studies and courses out there on finding God's will in your life.

Henry notes that:

- **God** pursues a continuing love relationship with you – not because you are “good,” or have done anything “good,” or because you are even likable (!) – He does it for His own reasons. Maybe, its just because He made you and He loves you.
- **God** is always at work around you – and He invites you to join Him in what He is doing even though you are not perfect, or willing, even “ready.” (He takes care of all of those things, by the way.)
- But **you** must make adjustments in your life to join God in what He is doing.

You didn't really think that this would be easy, or require *nothing different* in your life, did you? “Make adjustment” indeed!

Thankfully, God doesn't just leave it at that! We can know Him, know His direction

for each of us, and with that, follow Him and do His work!

Ok, how do we do that as a church? -- Well, we organize to perform God's mission ... and that organization into groups and into processes and practices is our "polity."



Here is how The Form of Government Task Force (who proposed the change we will consider in a minute) looks at "polity" ...

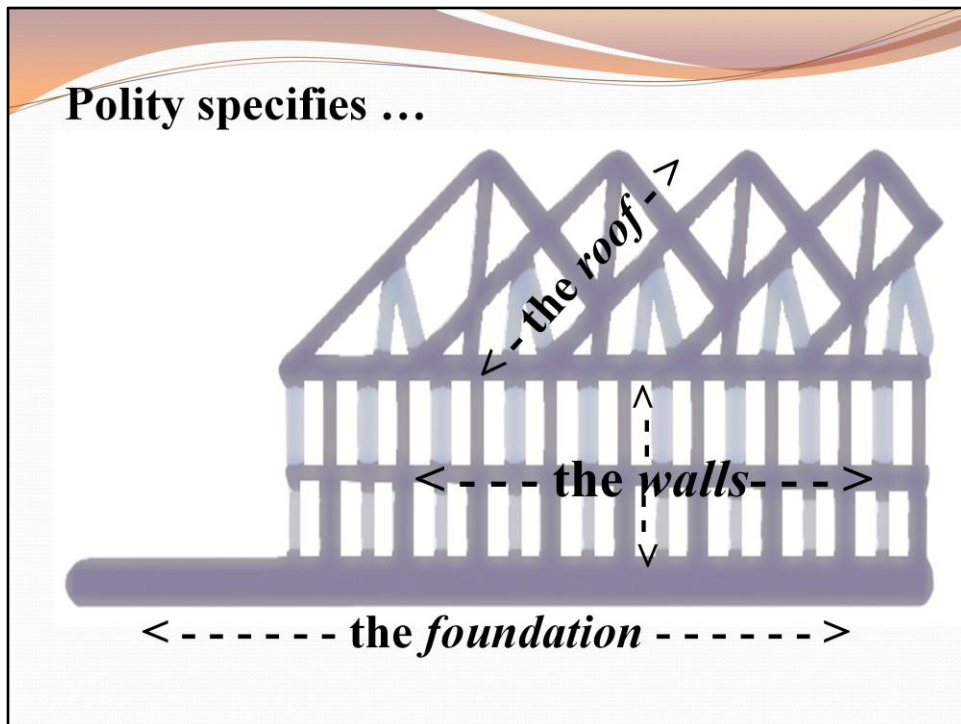
The New Form Of Government Task Force defined **polity** with this analogy:

- **Polity** is a **plan** - for building a **church community** ...
  - In which to serve God
  - and
  - from which to participate in God's mission in the world.

It is, if you will, a **blueprint** – or the **architecture** – of the church's organization and operation.

Just as a blueprint is a plan for building a house in which to live and work ...

- **Polity** is the *architecture of mission*.

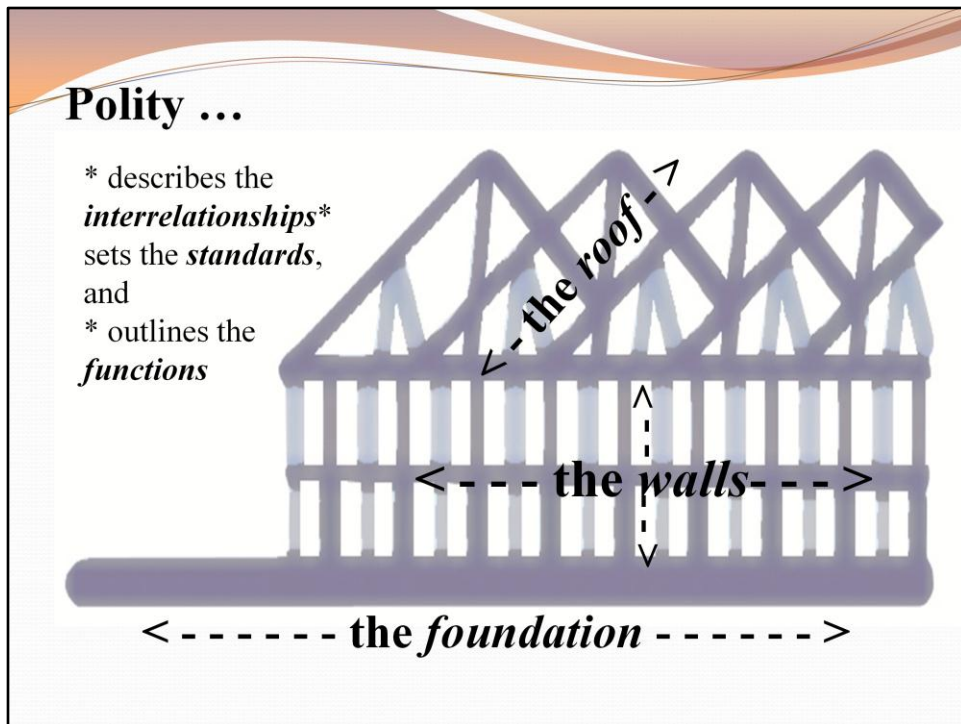


Like any good architecture ... any good blueprint ... ***polity specifies --***

the *dimensions of the **theological foundations*** upon which our polity rests,

the *height and width of our **ecclesiastical walls***, and

the *pitch of our **covenantal roof***...



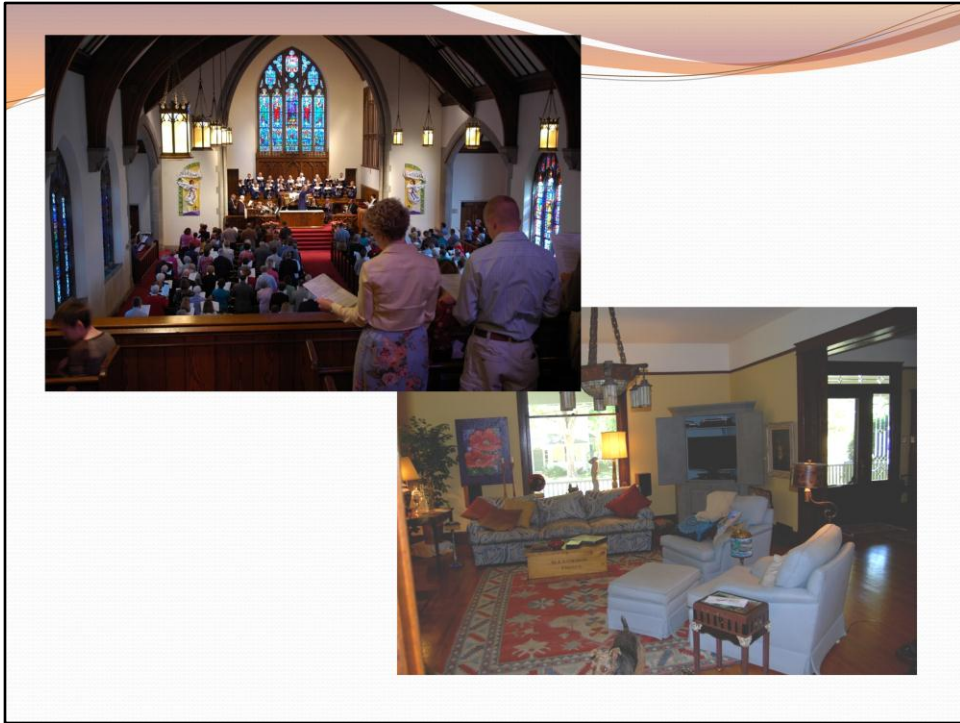
It's the same with the relationship between polity and the practice of the life of the church.

**Polity ...**

- \* describes the *interrelationships* between the parts of the church,
- \* sets out the *standards* by which the church measures its ministry,
- \* and outlines the *functions* necessary to being the church.

But, **Polity** should leave to individual councils the decisions about

- what practices best serve those interrelationships in their place,
- what processes best produce ministry outcomes to meet those standards in their neighborhood, and
- what structures best perform those functions with their members and other local resources.



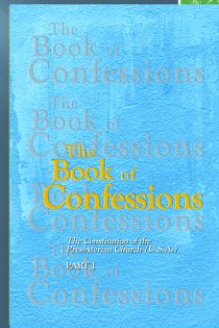
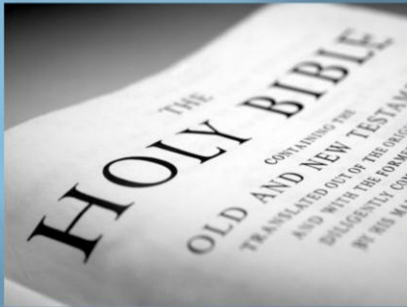
But it doesn't tell us anything about the arrangement of the furniture in the room, or what pictures hang on the walls!

Those decisions are left to the ones who will live in the house – or worship in the sanctuary. Making those decisions is what turns ...

a **house** into a **home**,

a **church organization** into a **faith community**.

## Where is this all written down?



That's nice.

How has that worked out for us?

So, again – where is all this “corporate practice / polity” written down?

... well – again - in the Holy Bible, actually. And again, not very systematically.

Remember, that being systematic (or “topical”) about what the Bible tells us about God and His relationship to us – and how we should do what He commands us to do – in the **manner in which** He commands us to do it is the work of our Constitution, specifically, its second part: The *Book of Order*.

But we Presbyterians love to settle our organization and practices in detail - and write all this stuff down, so our *Book of Order* also specifies that we write *procedural* Manuals of Operation -- for GA , the Synods, the presbyteries, and for sessions to further explain how we ‘council’ at those levels – in their respective, specific locations.

After all, *writing is all down* makes for doing it ‘decently and in order,’ right?

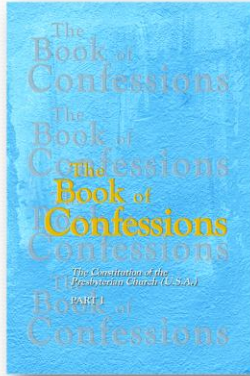
Our *Book of Order* also requires each of our church bodies to incorporate as non-profit corporations under the laws of the state in which it resides (or does business), if the state of residence allows such civil organization for churches. So, our church has so organized and has written our polity down our civil Articles of Incorporation and in our corporation’s bylaws.

Our *Book of Order* also requires each of our church bodies keep minutes of all governance meetings – as these capture both the **actions** – and the **policies** of the body, as they are made. (These policies underlie the content of the manuals of operation for our Session and Deaconate.)

Let's look today into our corporate practices as they are described in our Constitution.

We actually start in ...

# The PC(USA) Constitution



## Part One

The Nicene Creed – A.D. 325  
The Apostles' Creed – A.D. 1<sup>st</sup> - 5<sup>th</sup> Cent

The Scots Confession – A.D. 1560  
The Heidelberg Catechism – A.D. 1563  
The Second Helvetic Confession – A.D. 1566

The Westminster Confession of Faith --  
The Larger Catechism 1647 /  
The Shorter Catechism 1729

The Theological Declaration of Barmen 1934  
The Confession of 1967  
A Brief Statement of Faith—Presbyterian Church (USA) A.D. 1983

**The Book of Confessions**, the general “beliefs” part of our constitution!

Surprise, surprise!

Remember – we noted last time that this collection of eleven creeds, confessions, and statements define our theological heritage as Reformed and Presbyterian Christians – and underlie our corporate practices.

Indeed, two of these confessions are both beliefs statements and explicit organizing statements!

- **The Scots Confession** – in our *Book of Confessions*, only 17 pages long, is divided into 25 chapters of topical *belief statements* – including about 4 pages devoted to prescribing what our Scottish forebears believed then (and we believe now) to be the scriptural description of the Form of Government for the church, and 3 pages devoted to the worship practices of the church.
- **The Second Helvetic (Swiss) Confession** – in our *Book of Confessions*, 116 pages long (!), is similarly divided into 30 chapters of topical *belief statements* – including about 22 pages also devoted to prescribing what our Swiss forebears believed then (and what we also believe now) to be the scriptural description of the Form of Government for the church, 16 pages

devoted to the worship practices of the church, and even a page devoted to the conduct of discipline within the church and its families. A little more detail, here.

The Westminster Standards (of which the confession and catechisms are a part) written in democratic England, also contains an organizing part that is not in our *Book of Confessions* - and we will address it in a moment.

These three confessions - written within 100 years of one another as these three protestant nations wrestled with their civil and ecclesiastical governance having just achieved a measure of deliverance from the monarchy -- captured the reformed scriptural thought on church and civil polity – with remarkable consistency.

## Westminster Standards-- 1647 / 1729

- A third faith and organization statement
- The Solemn League & Covenant
- The Shorter Catechism
- The Larger Catechism
- **Directory for Publick Worship**
- **Directory for Family Worship**
- **Form of Presbyterial Church Government**
- The Sum of Saving Knowledge
- Warrants to Believe

John Knox – **Second Book of Church Discipline**



Herbert, John Rogers, RA (ca. 1844), *The Assertion of Liberty of Conscience by the Independents at the Westminster Assembly of Divines* (painture)

### The Westminster Standards

Recall that in 1643, the English House of Commons adopted an ordinance calling for the “settling of the government and liturgy of the Church of England in a manner most agreeable to God’s Holy Word and most apt to procure the peace of the church at home and nearer abroad.” Last week we dealt with the “liturgy” part – this week, its the “government” part.

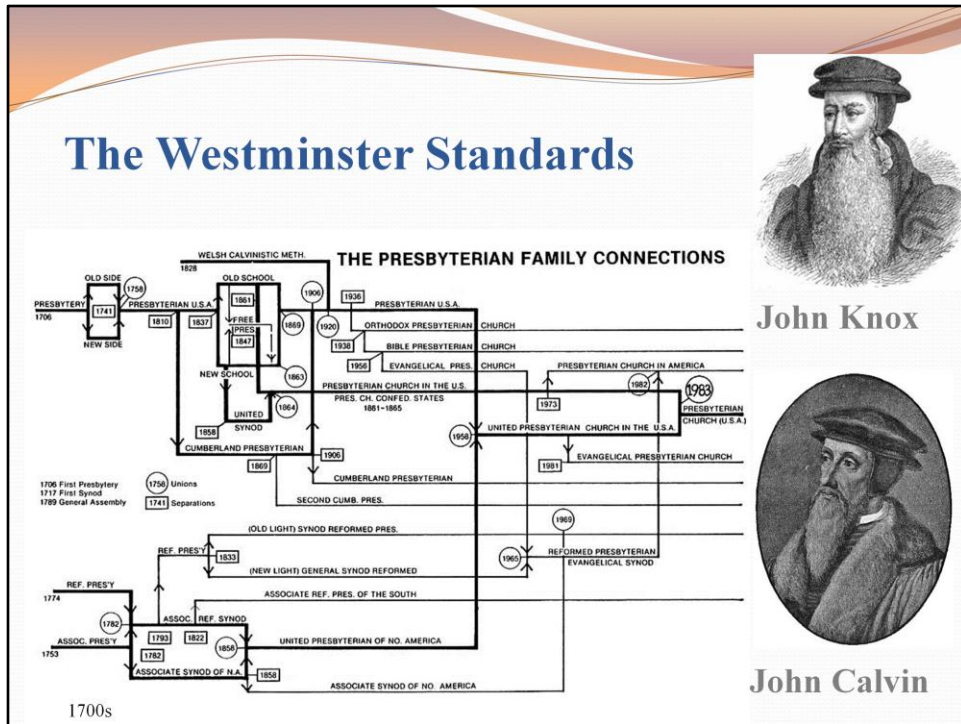
In appealing to Scripture to formulate a covenant theology, these standards had important implications for political thought and practice, reminding both ruler and people of their duties **to God** and **to each other** – and that these duties must work out in the practice of governing the church.

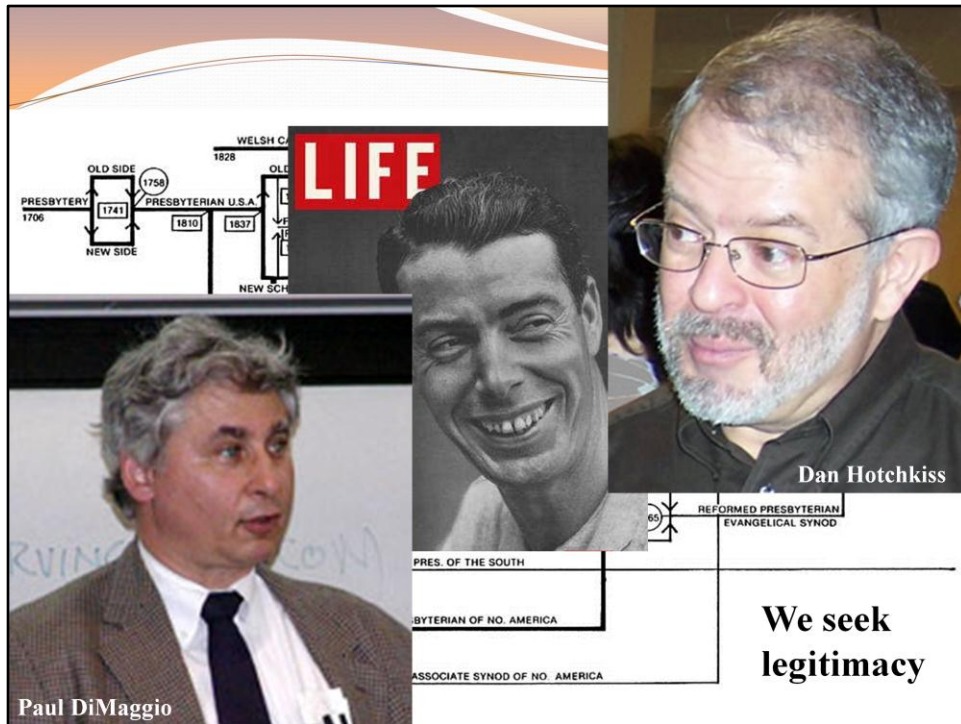
Their content is not only consistent with the earlier Scots and Second Helvetic confessions on these topics – it was the foundational organizing document of Presbyterian witness in America from the first congregations - in the 1600s - to today.

The parts we are interested in today are the organization statements - the:

- Directory for Publick Worship
- Directory for Family Worship, and the
- Form of Presbyterial Church Government

Together with John Knox's **Second Book of Church Discipline**, these are the parts that American Presbyterianism used and use for its governance (with development and modification) to this day.





A **third** factor: **The intense Presbyterian desire for legitimization in the eyes of the ambient culture.**

This one also goes back to the very first days of Presbyterianism in colonial America - we struggled even then to form an identity as a church with legitimizing standards within (and maybe counter to) this new world environment of religious toleration - an environment with church forms everywhere from a monolithic hierarchy -- to association through name only -- to no association at all!

But, lets not be too harsh on the Presbyterians for this ...

**Paul DiMaggio** (that is *Paul* , the Princeton sociologist - not *Joe*, the more famous Yankees centerfielder) observes:

... institutions -- developed in different fields within a culture [but] in the same period -- will assume *remarkably similar shapes*.

Alban Institute senior consultant, **Dan Hotchkiss** notes that religious institutions borrow organizational forms from the society around them all the time -- and are **often shaped more by cultural influences than biblical influences.**

For example, none of these familiar organizational forms is mandated by Scripture:

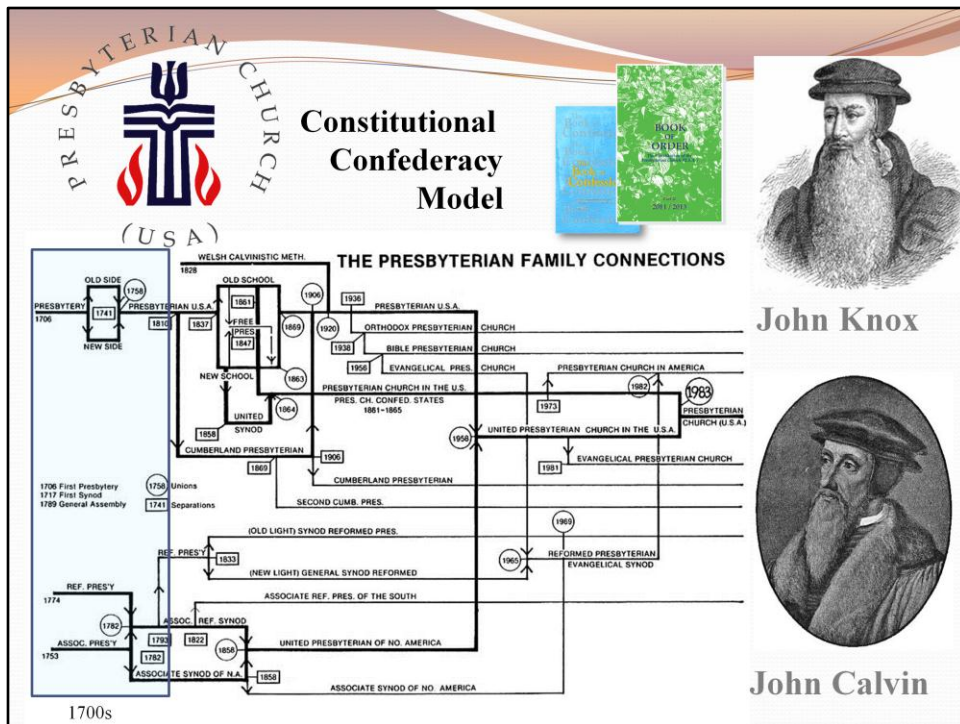
- the early church was organized like a Hellenistic mystery cult,
- the medieval church resembled monarchy,
- New England Puritans cloned the structure of an English town.

Thanks to the democratic bent of our culture from its first settlement on the continent - the culture itself was ready for the Presbyterians' form of representative government – and – the church was the only really big institution (other than the emerging need for a continental government)! So the culture copied us – the representative democracy, the most suitable model for the contemporary political thought pattern.

But that was soon to turn around. The most important modern influences on the structure of the contemporary American church or synagogue dating from the 19th century were the evolving business and governmental structures, enabled when the **nonprofit corporation** emerged as an all-purpose container for benevolent work. Where did we just hear the phrase “nonprofit corporation”?

Fact is, Craig Dykstra and James Hudnut-Beumler's study (The National Organizational Structures of Protestant Denominations: An Invitation to a Conversation) illuminates Paul and Dan's observations in even more detail, tracing the evolution of the polity of American protestant denominations from “Constitutional Confederacy” model, to the “Corporation” model, to the “Regulatory Agency” model of the last 40 years.

We Presbyterians are that – on steroids! I am going to “borrow heavily” from this paper, here.



## The Constitutional Confederacy Model

The American Revolution produced a new crisis for churches: they could no longer look to their lands of origin for leadership and governance.

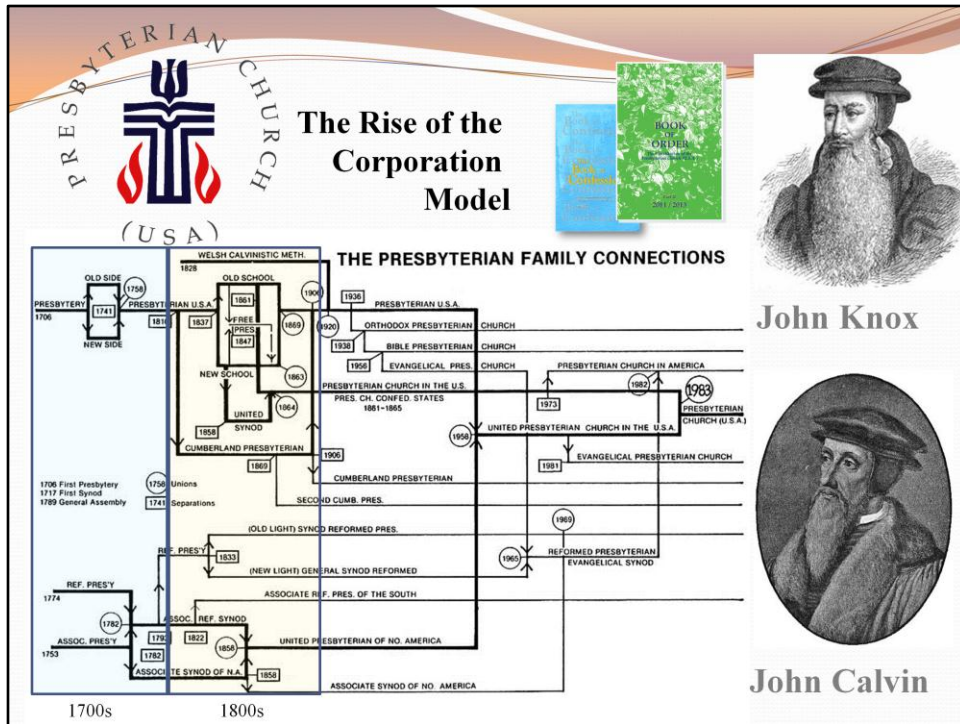
Craig and James describe the American denominational organizations from these years forward as “constitutional confederations” because they were formed around constitutions – but of a type quite limited in its scope -- and whose standards were more doctrinal or confessional statements.

For Presbyterians, these were the Westminster Standards, adopted in 1789 (with some new-world modifications).

These “constitutional confederations” were neither bureaucracies nor program agencies. Their motivating issues were primarily “*ministerial succession, guidance, and governance*” and there were no other resource expectations beyond meeting these few practical needs of their congregations through a minimalist structure.

Note that although U.S. Articles of Confederation – and then the constitutional development (happening in this same time period) created the *permission and framework* for broad and strong, central governmental agencies, none were formed (e.g., at that time, no one even imagined a Department of Health, Education & Welfare in the fledgling Federal government – let alone a National Board of Home Missions or Christian Education within the denomination, for that matter).

But, this confederacy model yielded to a two-stage evolution leading to the rise of a corporate model of the robust and programmatic American denomination over the next century.



## Rise of the Corporation Model

The **first stage** in the evolution toward the corporate model was ***the rise of religious voluntary associations*** in the 19th century, gathered around perceived societal needs that the American Protestant church was not meeting through its *non-programmatic* denominational structures.

- Issues such as: opposition to slavery, prohibition of alcohol, distribution of tracts and Bibles, and the propagation of home and foreign missions.
- These societies crossed both denominational and faith tradition lines.

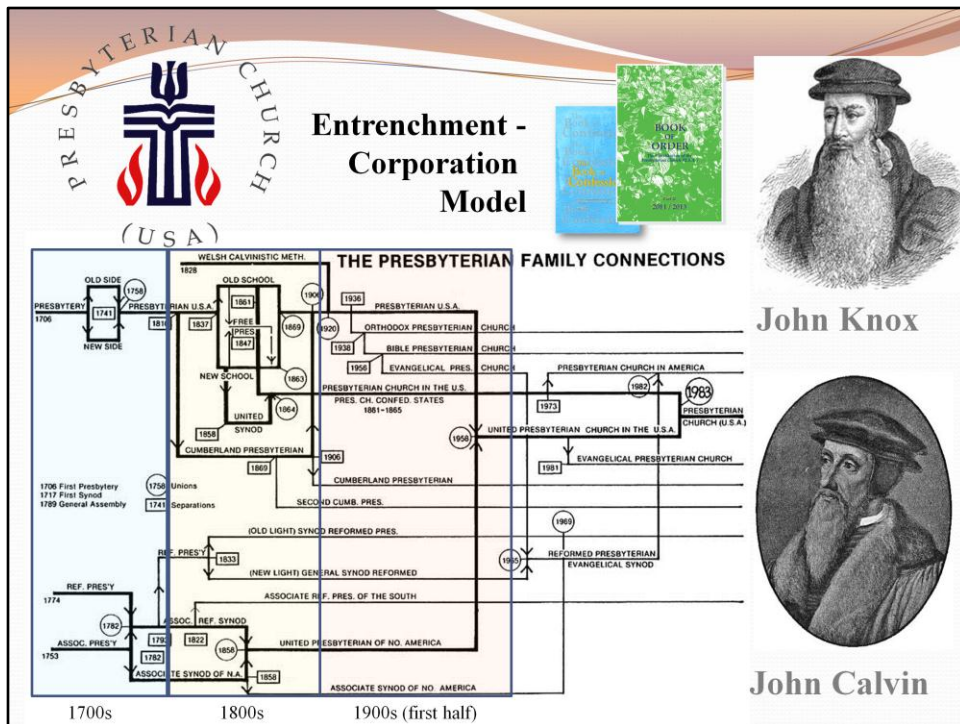
Thus the ecclesiastical form of choice in the antebellum period was a weak central church government with a modest set of responsibilities - coupled with a wide range of independent, loosely-related societies for Christian endeavors.

So, too, in American culture of the period. Note the lack of a nationally embraced central bank system at this time - and even the absence of a nationally standardized time system until the railroads implemented the first one in 1883. (The U.S. Standard Time Act was finally adopted in 1918 – 35 years later!).

By the turn of the century, we see the **second stage** in the evolution toward the corporate model – **technology** -- bringing changes in communication, transportation, and production which, in turn, gave rise to ***national systems of centralized production and distribution***. Trusts, collectives, and, above all, vertically integrated corporations began to blossom – as telegraph, telephone, railroad, radio, and mass production were societal shapers whose problem-approach concepts also became available to the church.

Should we be surprised that religious denominations, led by clergy and business elites accustomed to thinking in the organizational forms of their time, should reorganize themselves on lines parallel to the worlds of business and government? After all, they had all gone to the same Ivy-league schools – and American society was increasingly inclined to look for national solutions to the problems of regional inconsistencies like the standardization of time zones across the transcontinental railway system.

The cultural stage was set for the development of religious denominations as corporations.



## Entrenchment of the Corporation Model

For both practical and ideological reasons (but not for theological reasons), by 1900 the die had been cast for a corporate-bureaucratic model that would characterize national-level American Protestantism for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

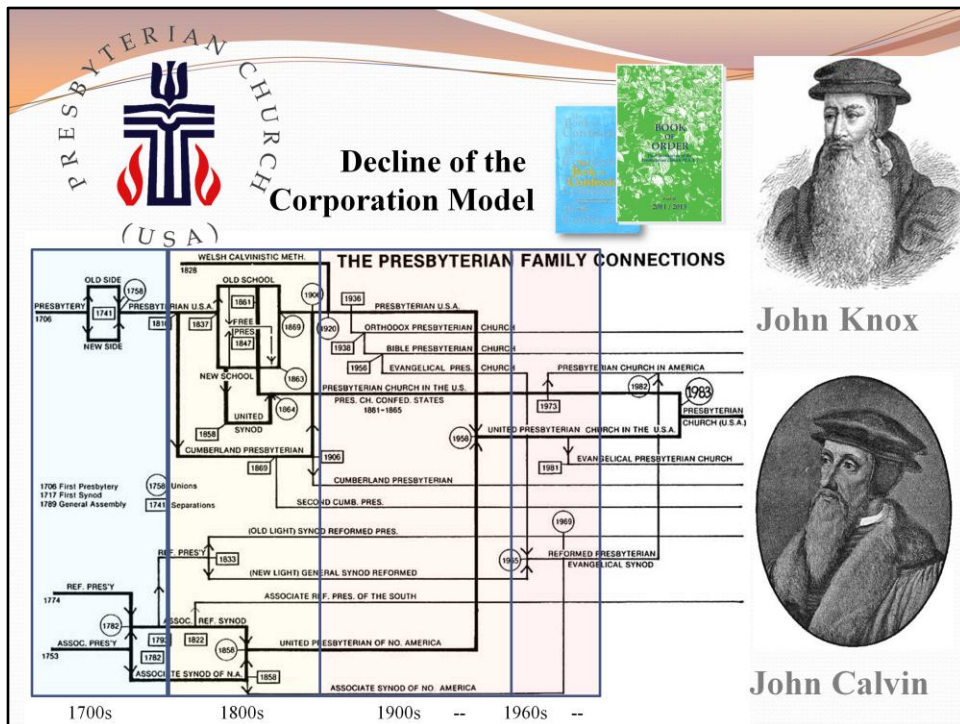
Just as business corporations were now provided goods and services to the secular, *national* consuming community, the modern denomination was no exception, bringing the work of the various independent, voluntary associations under centralized, national, and denominational control: Sunday School curricula, denominational periodicals, and national resources for church architecture, insurance, and pension programs became centralized and administered through national offices. National solutions for local problems.

Management of substantial foreign mission dollars drove centralization of these programs. Just like today, foreign missions funding was easier to raise than domestic program dollars, so centralizing all denominational programs, including foreign missions, provided a consolidated income base to fund the growing spectrum of denominational services.

Early the 20th century, denominational assemblies and national conventions even began to act much like stockholders' meetings where the "stockholders" (or their

“proxy representatives” in the representative systems) would vote on materials already prepared by denominational staff. National boards and councils were served by male pastors and lay leaders primarily of the large and wealthy congregations, very much like the boards of directors of corporations in the business world.

This corporate model was very well received and appreciated by the church across the denominations – as a Presbyterian example, by the mid-50s the paid subscription list of *Presbyterian Life* magazine exceeded one million, surpassing that of *Newsweek*.



## Decline of the Corporation Model

But then – enter the 1960s (remember them? – some entered and never came out). The 1960s saw the corporate model’s effectiveness begin to decline – eroded by the major questions and turmoil that were then sweeping American society.

Here are three:

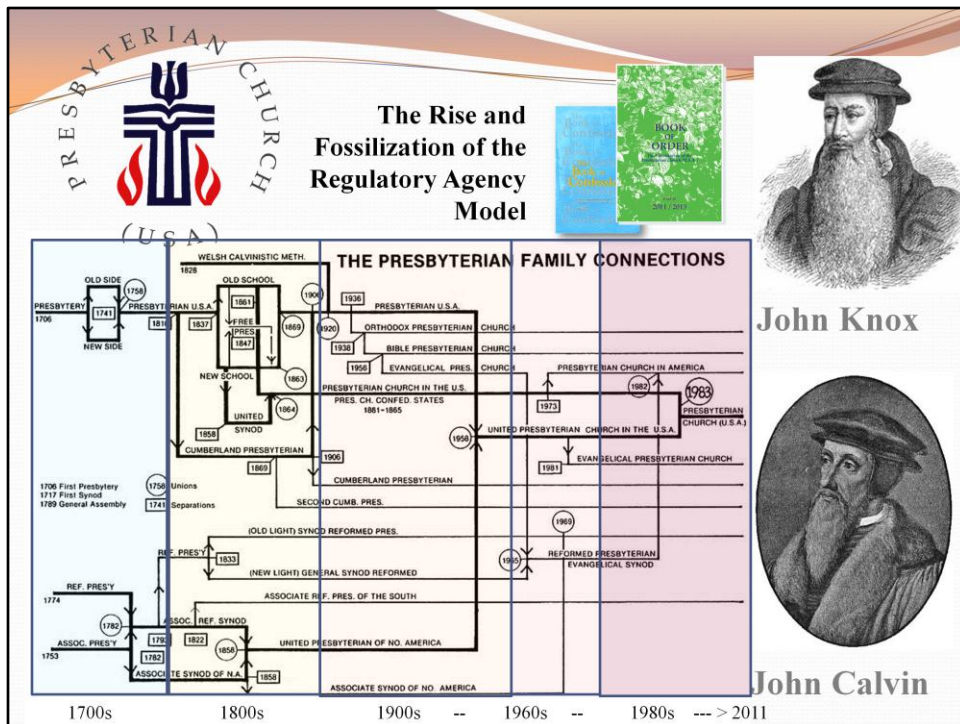
- **The rise of the “I’m entitled” generation** demanding resolutions to the given affinity groups’ issues *by someone else*,
- **Guilt – driving change in global mission activity patterns** as American denominations became increasingly aware of their historic tendency of cultural imperialism in their “missions” to other countries and cultures, and ...
- The mid-60’s **end of the postwar baby boom**. Two impacts manifest from this:
  - Sunday School attendances hit their peaks; but, membership levels soon began a steady - and continuing – decline as the number of families with young children began to decline. And ...
  - In less than a generation, religious giving also began to decrease – right at the time when denominational bureaucracies had swelled in the wake of the robust and enthusiastic growth of the 1950s. This began a vicious cycle of “shrinking-dollar”-driven cuts to popular

services and a resulting growth - in membership dissatisfaction.

The reduction of the services provided by the national denominational offices - and the precipitous fractioning of national consensus over what types of services should be offered - contributed to the rise of special interest consultants and advocacy organizations in this period.

In the face of more open conflict over ideological and theological agendas, post-1960s American society saw a tremendous rise in the number and kinds of affinity and special-interest groups in general. And sure enough - these types of groups also caught on within denominations, too.

Within the Presbyterian Church, some of these groups organized to meet perceived needs not met by the denomination's programming, and others were actually formed to purposely oppose the denomination's programs and positions!



## The Rise and Fossilization of the Regulatory Agency Model

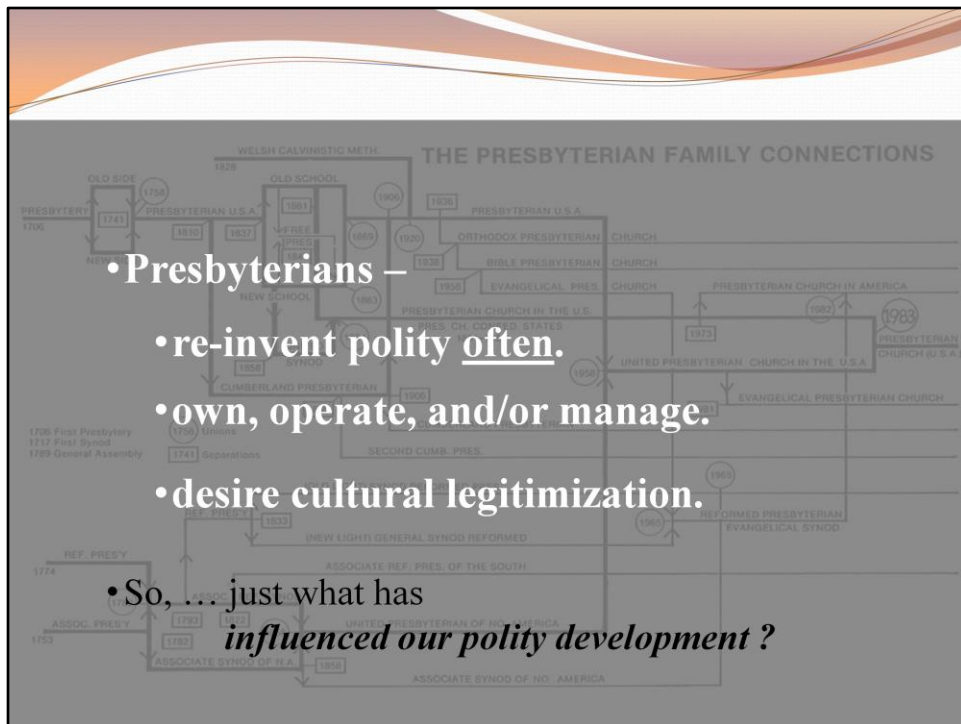
The national denominational structure (overall by then, the largest and most expensive bureaucracy the church had ever known) was competing with these special interest groups for the now- *limited and declining* pool of financial resources. Craig and James observe: “*when denominational leaders find they no longer have adequate educational resources or persuasive powers to influence social and ecclesiastical change, they attempt to mandate it through regulation.*”

Conflict and disappointment bred and flourished when, in an increasingly pluralistic world, denominational policies reflected political and theological agendas that represented the desires and values of some particular segments of the church - *but not the whole church.*

Conflict and frustration bloomed when the regulatory church *mandated practices that neither the denomination nor its grassroots could afford.* (The “unfunded mandate” eventually becomes a sign of the regulatory model - failing.)

These growing , institutional regulatory habits were presided over by bureaucrats in a bureaucracy that took on a life of its own and sought to preserve itself as an institution.

All of these polity changes – large and small, radical and incremental - were institutionalized in the Constitutions of the mainline Presbyterian churches. And change continued. In just the three decades since the 1983 re-join of the *Presbyterian Church in the U.S.* and the *United Presbyterian Church in the USA* - that resulted in our denomination (and its new Constitution), we have seen well over 300 amendments to all of the parts of our *Book of Order*, the addition of our eleventh confession, **A Brief Statement of Faith** (commemorating the 1983 re-join) to our *Book of Confessions*, a proposed re-write of the Heidelberg Confession which failed to get out of the 218<sup>th</sup> GA, – and the proposed addition of a twelfth confession, which was narrowly rejected in the presbyteries' voting this past summer.



So with these three factors in mind,

- Presbyterians in America have had a great deal of opportunity to re-invent how they govern their church.
- Presbyterians (and especially, Presbyters) in America have always owned, operated, and/or managed American industry.
- The Presbyterian have always had an intense desire for legitimization in the eyes of the ambient culture.

... if we want to understand our polity, the question becomes: what has *influenced the development of the polity of God's Church On Earth – in America?*

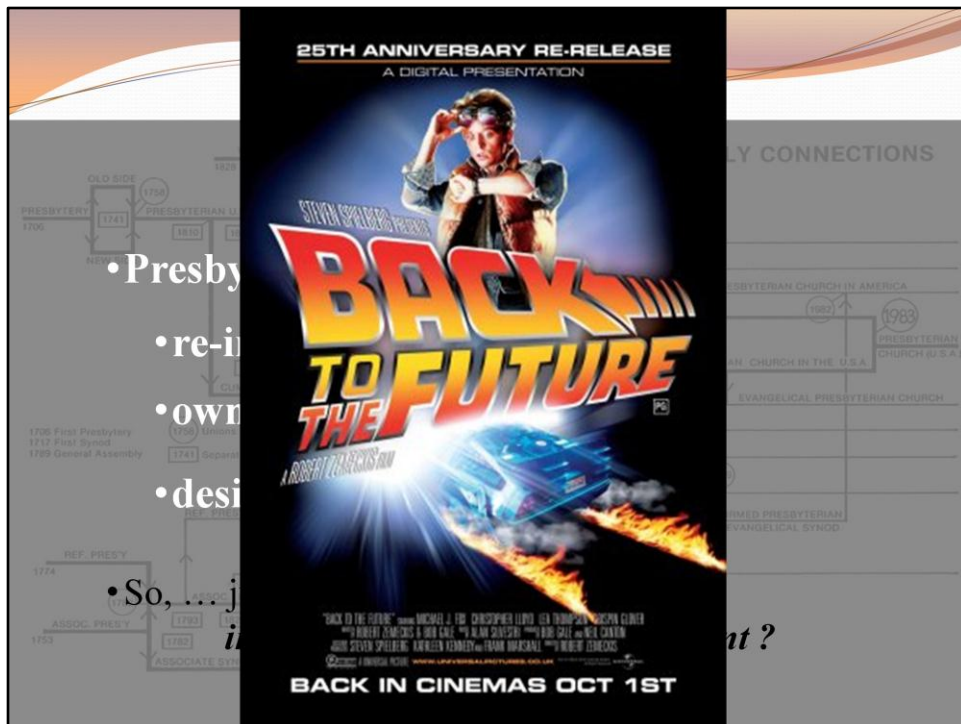
The *Bible*? – or the *surrounding organizational culture*?

With a fully regulatory polity model in its one-size-fits-all processes firmly emplaced, the Book of Order had swollen to 495 pages over its development.

Thus, the stage was set for a radical change to the “practices” part of our constitution: The *Book of Order*.

Time to change! Time to get back to basics. Time to let local counsels determine their own processes for “how” stuff gets done – and retain in the constitution only the standards of “what” needs to be done.

We find both God and the Devil – in the details...



I think that we will find that we are really going ... **Back to the Future!**

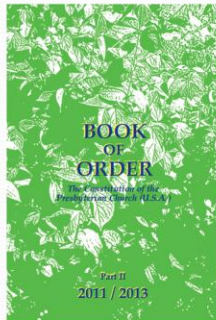
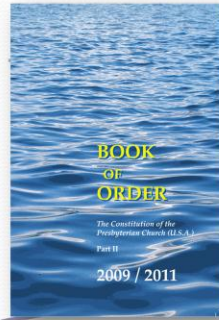
We will cover lots more stuff as we look at our polity, so strap on those seatbelts – and -- Here we go!

# The PC(USA) Constitution

Form of  
Government

Directory  
for Worship

Rules of  
Discipline



Foundations of  
Presbyterian  
Polity

Form of  
Government

Directory  
for Worship

Rules of  
Discipline

The old < Part Two > the new

Thus, the stage was set for a radical change to the “practices” part of our constitution: The *Book of Order*.

The “newFOG” amendment, passed this summer by the presbyteries, replaced the previous, 18 chapter **Form of Government** in the *Book of Order* - shown on the left, with two books, cutting the previous FOG’s chapter count in half.

So - on the right, the new *Book of Order* now contains:

- A brand new 11 page, three chapter re-statement of the 13 pages that had held the first 4 chapters in our previous FOG, titled the **Foundations of Presbyterian Polity** and
- A much-reduced **Form of Government** – containing the principles of the previous FOG’s chapters 5-18 (on 126 pages) in only six chapters (on 35 pages). These two books account for the net loss of 78 pages from the *Book of Confessions*
- The traditional, **Directory for Worship** - unchanged by newFOG,
- And the traditional, **Rules of Discipline** - unchanged by newFOG, as well.

Please note that the fifteen Part 3 amendments, all of which also passed this summer, made paragraph-specific changes in all parts of the *Book of Order* – and they are also incorporated in this new *Book*.

As you know, our previous, 495 page *Book of Order* had three parts:

The **Form of Government**, which described the essential tenants of our faith (in the first four chapters) ... and our church's system of governance: the interrelationships, standards by which we measure our ministries, the processes, and the functions of our church (in the remaining fourteen chapters). All together 162 pages of these 495, all of which are replaced by the 71 pages of the New FOG.

The **Directory for Worship**, which provides required standards and suggested process aspects of our worship life (in its seven Chapters) – the next 78 pages of the 495, none of which were affected by the “New FOG.”

And the **Rules of Discipline**, which outlines the standards and process for resolving disputes within the life of our church (in its fourteen Chapters and seven Appendices) – the next 62 pages of the 495, again, none of which were affected by the “New FOG.”

Leaving 153 pages in the *Book of Order* for its introduction, table of contents, section headings, end notes (i.e., the scriptural references and other notes footnoted in the text of the FOG, the DOW, and the ROD), six topical appendices, and the presbyter's (and seminarian's) best friend – the exhaustive indexes to the *BOO* which are the last 70 pages of the *Book*.

Let's turn our attention to today's *Book of Order* – slimmed down by 78 pages of removed material to a svelte 417.

Ready? Here we go -- first, with the added **Foundations of Presbyterian Polity**...

# Foundations of Presbyterian Polity

## *The Mission of the Church*

- God's mission in Jesus Christ, the Head of the Church
- "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic"
- Marks/Notes of the true, Reformed Church
- Great Ends of the Church
- Commitment to unity in diversity



The **Foundations of Presbyterian Polity** reduces the previous **Form of Government's** first four chapters with a 15% net content reduction, made *primarily* through re-expression of concepts.

The content looks like confessional or theology stuff, because it is the scriptural basis for ecclesiastical polity – an expression of God's direction on how to "church."

Watch the graphic at the bottom of the slide as it shows how the this new book builds the breadth and depth of the theological foundation of our polity. The graphic captures the Task Force's notion that "polity" is the architecture – or blueprint -- of mission, not the mission itself.

Chapter One is about the Mission of the Church, and deals with our core theological commitments. It draws heavily on the *concepts* in Chapters 1, Preliminary Principles, 3, The Church and Its Mission, and 4, The Church and Its Unity, of our previous Form of Government, generally re-writing and re-ordering the *text* of these three chapters.

The chapter – indeed, the entire polity of the church – begins with the confession that the Triune God is engaged through Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit, in a mission of creation, redemption, and transformation of lives, societies, and the whole of creation. The Church, created by God's mission in the world, exists to bear witness to and to participate in that mission. We affirm that Jesus Christ is the only

Lord and head of the Church. This chapter then makes four statements about the Church that echo our values.

The Foundations of Presbyterian Polity understands the Church...

1. to be the **body of Christ**, and a community called to faith, hope, love, and witness
2. to be “**one, holy, catholic, and apostolic**” – the marks of the Church from the Nicene Creed
3. to
  - proclaim to all people the good news through **proclamation of the Word**,
  - sharing with all people the grace of God through **administration of the sacraments**, and
  - calling all people to a **common life of discipleship through ecclesiastical discipline**

(these are the Notes of the true Church from the Scots Confession (Chapter XVIII). [These are important later in the Form of Government Chapter 3, where they provide the framework for discussing the responsibilities of the four councils of the church.]

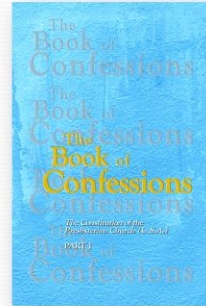
4. to work toward the six “**great ends**” or *purposes of the church* (as they are termed in this chapter).

The final section of this chapter focuses on the Church’s openness to God's Spirit as it seeks constant reformation, broader ecumenicity, and greater commitment to unity and diversity.

# Foundations of Presbyterian Polity

## *The Church and Its Confessions*

- **Current G-2.0000, almost verbatim**
- **The confessions in the life of the PC(USA)**



Chapter Two is about the Church and Its Confessions – which underlay all of our practice – as the church faced difficult problems through its age.

It outlines our commitment to Christian, Protestant, and Reformed creeds and confessions, understanding them as efforts by the Church to articulate universal truths of the gospel from within particular historical moments.

It lists the confessions, details the Book, and tells us how to use them. Your worship committee should live in this chapter!

Its contents are almost word-for-word the contents of chapter two, The Church and Its Confessions, in the previous Form of Government.

# Foundations of Presbyterian Polity

## *Principles of Order and Government*

- **Historic Principles of Church Order (1789)**
- **Historic Principles of Church Government (1797)**

Chapter Three lays out the Historic Principles of Order and Government, part of our polity since 1789, and gathers the familiar “Historic Principles of Church Government” (previously G-1.0400) and the “Principles of Presbyterian Government” (previously G-4.0301) in a single statement (F-3.02).

Again, though it draws heavily on the *concepts* in the previous Chapters 1, Preliminary Principles, and 4, The Church and Its Unity, of our previous Form of Government – it generally re-writes and re-orders the *text* of these two chapters.

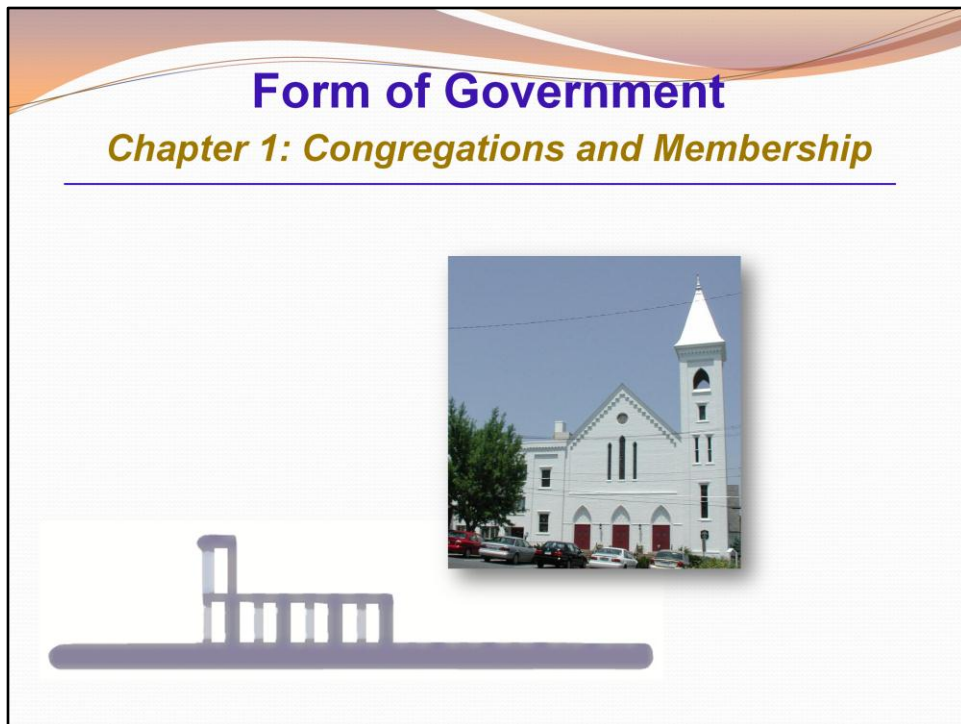
This new chapter also clarifies the relationship between the Foundations and the rest of the *Book of Order*, indicating that provisions of any part of the Constitution are to be interpreted in light of the whole Constitution – an historic and foundational concept of our practice also resident in our previous Form of Government.

## Form of Government



Turning to the second book – the **Form of Government**, it takes the remaining 14 chapters of the previous Form of Government (G-5 - G-18), and presents them in 6 chapters – reducing the previous 117 page treatment of the concepts presented in these fourteen chapters of nuts-and-bolts (one size fits all), process guidance by 78% to 26 pages – primarily by removing the “process-detail” stuff to the Advisory Handbooks’ challenge-questions to the councils, so the councils can beef-up their Manuals of Operation to assure that they cover all the bases -- from their local perspective.

What is not removed is also re-ordered and re-expressed in a more “principal” form – rather than as process-details.



Now watch the graphic on these slides show how the new **Form of Government** builds the church on the **Foundation of Presbyterian Polity** we just reviewed – how it extends the ecclesiastical walls to their height and width and defines the pitch and coverage of our covenantal roof – but leaves the “finishing touches” on the outside of the building and the “arrangement of the furniture” inside the building to needs of the local situation.

Chapter One of the **Form of Government** covers material previously found in G-5.0000, The Church and Its Members, and G-7.0000, The Particular Church.

The chapter begins with an affirmation of our Presbyterian form of connectional government. It affirms that although the congregation is the basic unit of mission in the church, and that although a congregation possesses all the gifts necessary to be the church, it asserts that a congregation is of itself an insufficient form of the church. We need the relationships we have through presbyteries, synods, and the General Assembly to be the church more fully.

This chapter also includes many practical matters that provide the framework for understanding the life and work of a congregation:

1. How a congregation is organized.
2. The meaning of membership, including a member’s involvement in the church’s ministry.

3. The categories of membership.
4. Matters related to congregational meetings, including business which properly may be conducted.



Chapter Two provides the framework for understanding the call to leadership in the church.

It holds material primarily from three different chapters of the previous book in this new Chapter (G-6.000, The Church and Its Officers, G-11.000, The Presbytery, and G-14.000, Ordination, Certification, and Commissioning – with a smidge from G-15.0202, Recognition Of Ordination).

It recognizes that all members of the church are “ministers” of Jesus Christ – but some are set aside to specific ministries.

“Ordered Ministry” is the term that replaces “office” or “officer.” This change is a way of affirming our commitment to two basic notions in Reformed faith about the Church:

1. that all baptized persons are called to ministry, not merely those who are elected as deacons, elders, and ministers; and
2. that the Church sets aside – or “sets into order” - the ministry of some to equip the whole people of God for the ministry of reconciliation.

The ordered ministries are the ones we are familiar with in the church. Each is described with a phrase summarizing the essence of the specific, ordered ministry:

1. **Deacons**, who exercise the ministry of compassion and service,

**2. Ruling elders**, who exercise the ministry of discernment and governance,  
and

**3. Teaching elders**, who exercise the ministry of the Word and Sacrament.

The latter two terms – ruling and teaching elders – are used to lift up the essential parity between these two ordered ministries.

The chapter also contains provisions for preparation for all ordered ministry, as well as two additional areas of service: Commissioned Ruling Elders to a limited pastoral service – (we previously called them “commissioned lay pastors”) – and certified church workers, including Certified Christian Educators, Musicians, and Administrators.

# Form of Government

## Chapter 3: Councils

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**Proclamation of the Word**

**Administration of the Sacraments**

**Ecclesiastical discipline**



Chapter Three deals with the Councils of the Church, and covers material previously in G-9.000 through G-13.0000 -- Governing Bodies, The Session, The Presbytery, The Synod, and The General Assembly.

This chapter provides the framework for understanding the role of councils in the life of the church and the specific functions of each council of the church.

“Councils” is the term that replaces “governing body.” ‘Governing’ is only part of what sessions, presbyteries, synods, and the General Assembly do; more importantly, each is a gathering of the Church’s theological and spiritual leaders for the purpose of discerning the will of Christ and guiding the church in following that will. Throughout its history, the Church has called such gatherings “councils.”

This chapter begins with a section of general principles common to all councils, such as matters of participation and representation, officers, meetings, administration and funding of mission, administrative review, committees and commissions, and other matters. Then the responsibilities of each council is presented, organized around the *Notes of the Reformed Church* (from the Scots Confession) first presented in F-1.0303 and repeated at the end of G-3.0101:

1. the proclamation of the Word,
2. the administration of the sacraments, and
3. the nurture of a covenant community of disciples through ecclesiastical

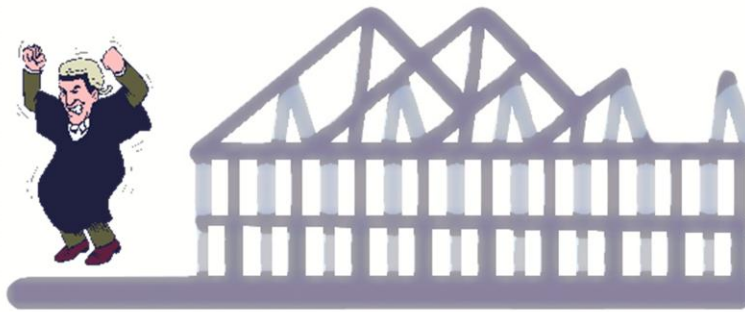
discipline.

This organization around the *Notes of the Reformed Church* is meant to reinforce that we are engaged in the church's mission given by God in all we do as Councils of the church. Instead of the previous long lists of tasks of governing bodies, the work of each Council is described in terms of how it contributes to the whole.

# Form of Government

## *Chapter 4: Church and Civil Authorities*

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Chapter Four deals with the relationship between the Church and Civil Authority.

Its contents are the same as those of previous G-8.0000, The Church and Its Property – matters related to incorporation and trustees, as well as church property – and the addition of the language about confidentiality and mandatory reporting that is previously in G-6.0000, The Church and Its Officers.



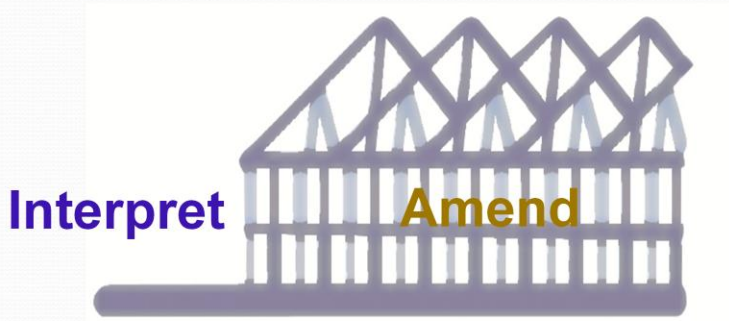
Chapter Five is about Ecumenicity and Church Union, the material covered in the previous Chapters 15, Relationships, 16 Union Churches, and 17, Union Governing Bodies, of the previous Form of Government.

Included here are the various ways in which the PCUSA relates to other denominations: correspondence, full communion, ecumenical statements; full organic union; union presbyteries; and various forms of joint congregational witness.

# Form of Government

## *Chapter 6: Interpreting and Amending the Constitution*

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Finally, Chapter Six covers Interpreting and Amending the Constitution, and is the same material as in the previous G-18, Amendments.

Also in this last chapter is the description of the Advisory Committee on the Constitution which has been moved here from its previous location in G-13.0112, Advisory Committee on the Constitution.



**So - there was a quick review of our denomination's polity practices in whole today:**

(under the watchful eyes of John Calvin and John Knox)

A new Form of Government – harking back to the earlier, principal age of colonial Presbyterianism and the Westminster Standards' Form of Government and Directories of Public and Personal Worship in its approach.



## So, where are **we** going from here?

Well, we have this nagging last question (a question we could have been asking for the last decade), to deal with today ...

Dr **Mark Roberts**, Senior Director and Scholar in Residence for Laity Lodge, noted in his blog back in 2008 (<http://markdroberts.com/?p=552>):

I want to define “we” in the question “Where do we go from here?”

For me, “we” means “members of the PCUSA who are deeply concerned about and in disagreement with many of the recent actions of the 2008 General Assembly, including but not limited [to] votes related to gay ordination.”

For the most part, “we” includes evangelical Presbyterians who are committed to the full authority of Scripture. (There are a few in this category who are not opposed to the GA actions, however.)

So, I am not asking “Where should the PCUSA go from here?” as if I were a part of the national denominational leadership. I’m speaking from my own perspective within the denomination.

So, then: *Where do we go from here?*

Wherever we go, I believe there's no need to rush. Or, I might better say, we should not rush. It's not as if the PCUSA suddenly, as if out of nowhere, voted to ordain gays and lesbians. This issue, and a host of related theological issues, have been with us for a long time.

Haste is neither required nor wise because ... we are still "free to be faithful." At this very moment, nobody is telling me I have to affirm something I don't believe or do something I think is wrong. If this were to happen, I would promptly leave the PCUSA rather than deny my conscience before the Lord. But at this time I am free to believe and act according to my sense of biblical righteousness and truth. (I'm aware that this time might be coming to an end in the PCUSA, however.)

....

I should qualify my view that there's no need to rush, however. I'm aware that some Presbyterian churches find themselves in presbyteries that are both liberal and hostile. I have heard stories about how some evangelical churches have been harassed and hampered by their presbyteries. Such churches are not "free to be faithful." Thus, for these churches, it may well be the right time to leave the denomination. Yet, even for these, I would recommend against rushing. A careful, thoughtful, prayerful process is always best, and rarely happens quickly.

As an aside, I want to note, once again, that the real substance of a denominational connection is not the relationship of members and churches to the national body, but rather the relationship to the local body, which in the case of the PCUSA is the presbytery.

- The local, tangible, face-to-face relationships are what really matter in practice.
- Larger denominational connections are mostly irrelevant to most churches most of the time.

## So, where are **we going** from here?

(Let's be sure we ask the right questions ...)

- So, where is **the PCUSA going** from here?
- So, where **shall I go** from here?

So, it looks like we really have two questions here –

- one about **our denomination**, and
- one focused on **you!**

But Mark gave us advice about caution, and two tests of relationship as we consider these questions:

- **The caution--there's no need to rush.** "Or, I might better say, we should not rush. This and its host of related theological issues, have been with us for a long time. Haste is neither required nor wise...."
- **The first test - "free to be faithful."** "At this very moment, nobody is telling me I have to affirm something I don't believe or do something I think is wrong. If this were to happen, I would promptly leave the PCUSA rather than deny my conscience before the Lord. But at this time I am free to believe and act according to my sense of biblical righteousness and truth."
- **The second test -- the real substance of a denominational connection.** It "is not the relationship of members and churches to the national body, but rather the relationship to the local body, which in the case of the PCUSA is

the presbytery [for teaching elders and congregations – and congregations for their members].


- The local, tangible, face-to-face relationships are what really matter in practice.
- Larger denominational connections are mostly irrelevant to most churches most of the time.”

## What do we know?

- *What will change?*
- *What might change?*
- *What won't change?*

And we should look at three categories of change – to separate fact from the plethora of hair-on-fire rants in the popular and religious media!

We will spend a bit of time on the first and breeze through the later two ...



“We proclaim that Christ is present with the Church in both Spirit and Word. We believe that the best days of Christ’s church are ahead of us. We encourage all Presbyterians to discern in conversation and prayer where God is calling us as a community of faith.”

Cynthia Bolbach, Moderator of the 219th General Assembly (2010)  
Gradye Parsons, Stated Clerk of the General Assembly  
Linda Valentine, Executive Director of the General Assembly Mission Council

Here is how the leaders of our denomination “bottom line” the future of the PCUSA – in their church-wide letter to us, back in February.

(read the slide – the letter’s full text is below for reference)

February 4, 2011  
General Assembly Leaders  
Cynthia Bolbach  
Gradye Parsons  
Linda Valentine  
LOUISVILLE

This is indeed a rich time of ferment and deep discernment in the Christian Church and denominations like the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Many talk about this era as being like a wilderness experience for the church, from which we can learn the lessons of being the vibrant people God leads from exile into life. At General Assembly we heard from Phyllis Tickle, who talks about “the incrustations of an overly established Christianity” that are being, even as we speak, broken open and reformed. And the good news, Tickle says as she looks back on centuries of Christianity, is that when this happens “the faith has spread – and been spread – dramatically into new geographic and demographic areas, thereby increasing exponentially the range and depth of Christianity’s reach as a result of its time of

unease and distress.”

We hear many voices seeking God's guidance in discerning how to move forward in a rapidly evolving church and culture. A number of pastors recently issued a Letter to the Presbyterian Church, expressing frustration and calling for something new.

Elsewhere, an open invitation has been extended to a conversation about more vital, faithful and connectional congregational ministry in the “next” PC(USA). The 219th General Assembly (2010) empowered a Middle Governing Body Commission, not only to consider the relationships of our middle governing bodies, but to act, upon request, responsively in new expressions of the church. Another task force has been set into motion to consider the whole form and function of our meetings of the general assembly, another is examining what the nature of the church is in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and yet another is considering how we can live up to our aspirations for racial and ethnic diversity. Presbyterians everywhere long for vibrant congregations and communities of faith, and relationships built upon trust and our common faith in Jesus Christ.

We are seeing a growing momentum across the church to foment a strategy of leadership, resources and polity which will inspire the transformation of congregations and the creation of new worshiping communities in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

We listen as the debate over a new Form of Government engages elders and pastors in shaping a more responsive polity.

We see presbyteries crafting new identities and fellowships.

We have ourselves been party to many conversations about the future of the church, convinced that it is the Spirit of Christ sparking conversations throughout. For we believe that it is in our places of brokenness that the work of Jesus Christ has always been most miraculous. The parables of our Savior are full of images that bear the hope of grace coming to a people living in hope, humility, faith. We live in the certain faith that this is Christ's Church, and for that reason, we engage in the re-formation of this church into the church we are being called to be.

We encourage ministers and elders; churches which are large or small; immigrant communities, men, women, and young people; established churches and innovative worship and mission communities to join in prayer and conversation, vision and leadership for the church in this exciting time.

We thank those who put before the church challenges, aspirations and ideas in commitment to God and to the church, for this will contribute to the conversations going on across the church. We appeal to those who do so to participate and engage

with, that ongoing conversation. John Calvin spoke of his commitment to working on the unity of the church:

“So far as I have it in my power, if I am thought to be of any service, I shall not be afraid to cross ten seas for this purpose, if that should be necessary.”

We ask that those who would challenge us also join with all of us across the church as we work together to make that happen.

We proclaim that Christ is present with the Church in both Spirit and Word. We believe that the best days of Christ’s church are ahead of us. We encourage all Presbyterians to discern in conversation and prayer where God is calling us as a community of faith. We invite you to join the discussion below.

[Cynthia Bolbach](#), Moderator of the 219th General Assembly (2010)

[Gradye Parsons](#), Stated Clerk of the General Assembly

[Linda Valentine](#), Executive Director of the General Assembly Mission Council

# *What will change?*

## **With passage of Part 1 – NewFOG ...**

- How to do (not *what* to do) – will be determined locally
  - **Proclaim the gospel** for the salvation of humankind;
  - **Provide shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship** of the children of God;
  - **Maintain (and practice) divine worship**;
  - **Preserve the truth**;
  - **Promote social righteousness**; and
  - **Exhibit the Kingdom of Heaven** to the world

As far as the future of the denomination goes, let's look at just two of the controversies – and their associated changes in the PCUSA we know about...

With the passage of newFOG, we do know that some things will change -- and we have talked about those changes already.

These same PCUSA Leaders, see it this way (in their church-wide letter of June 7):

### ***What will change?***

*Many Presbyterians will see nothing suddenly or dramatically different with a new Form of Government. Worship services will go on as usual, and congregations will continue to teach the faith, serve their communities, reach out to those in need, and work to further God's realm on earth. However, what will be different is that congregations, presbyteries, and synods will have the opportunity to tailor mission and ministry to fit their own particular contexts and challenges.*

*The new FOG will also usher in changes in terminology. For example, ministers of the Word and Sacrament will be known as teaching elders, partnering in ministry with ruling elders who serve on the congregation's council (session).*

*In Christ,*

**Cindy Bolbach**

*Moderator of the 219th General Assembly (2010)*

**Gradye Parsons**

*Stated Clerk of the General Assembly*

**Linda Valentine**

*Executive Director, General Assembly Mission Council*

**Landon Whitsitt**

*Vice Moderator of the 219th General Assembly (2010)*

I thought the best comment on this letter was from a reader named “David” a few days later: “Just my luck I am taking polity this summer.”

# *What will change?*

## **With passage of Item 10A (Ordination Standards) ...**

- This summer's vote of the presbyteries removed the definition of marriage and chastity from the *Book of Order*.
- The real change --218<sup>th</sup> GA's *Authoritative Interpretations* that:
  - lifted the UPCUSA and PCUS condemnation of homosexuality as sinful – and
  - restored the right to “scruple” the Constitution.

Although the 219<sup>th</sup> GA last summer – and the presbyteries (by their vote this summer) have taken the heat on this issue, the ordination standards of the church had already taken a big left turn some time ago.

Dr **Mark Roberts** reports that over the last decade: Churches were calling openly gay pastors, presbyteries were ordaining and installing them, and PJs were condoning these actions. Several prominent movements have coordinated and supported these actions: **That All May Freely Serve**, the **Covenant Network** and the **More Light** movement. Several have opposed it: **The Layman**, the **Presbyterian Renewal Network**, and others.

The real change; however, was codified in a few actions of the 218<sup>th</sup> GA that didn't get much press, but will have a big effect:

- By a 53% to 47% vote, the assembly adopted a new Authoritative Interpretation (AI) on G-6.0106b: *Interpretive statements concerning ordained service of homosexual church members by the 190th General Assembly (1978) of the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, and the 119th General Assembly (1979) of the Presbyterian Church in the United States and all subsequent affirmations thereof, have no further force or effect.*

- By a 54% to 46% vote, the assembly adopted a new AI on G-6.0108 which restores the intent of the Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church report (2006) to allow someone who is being considered for ordination or installation as a deacon, elder, or minister to register a conscientious objection to the standards or beliefs of the church and ask the ordaining body to enter into a conversation with them to determine the seriousness of the departure.

Reported by our Stated Clerk in our meeting of the Synod of the Pacific, the week before last, we have a remedial case today in our Synod (Parnell, *et al.* v. The Presbytery of San Francisco) over exactly this ordination issue – and it will resolve within the framework of these interpretations. (See: <http://www.synodpacific.org/home/synod2/ParnellFINAL1.pdf> ).

## A Caution, and Two Tests

- **The caution - there's no need to rush.**
- **The first test - “free to be faithful.”**
- **The second test - denominational connection.**

But Mark gave us advice about caution, and two tests of relationship as we consider these questions:

- **The caution--there's no need to rush.** “Or, I might better say, we should not rush. This and its host of related theological issues, have been with us for a long time. Haste is neither required nor wise....”
- **The first test - “free to be faithful.”** “At this very moment, nobody is telling me I have to affirm something I don't believe or do something I think is wrong. If this were to happen, I would promptly leave the PCUSA rather than deny my conscience before the Lord. But at this time I am free to believe and act according to my sense of biblical righteousness and truth.”
- **The second test -- the real substance of a denominational connection.** It “is not the relationship of members and churches to the national body, but rather the relationship to the local body, which in the case of the PCUSA is the presbytery [for teaching elders and congregations – and congregations for their members].
  - The local, tangible, face-to-face relationships are what really matter in practice.
  - Larger denominational connections are mostly irrelevant to most churches most of the time.”

## *What might change?*

- Squabbling continues in the Big Tent
- Greater forbearance in the Big Tent
- The Big Tent splits organizationally
- The Big Tent loses individual members

Ah! But, what might change? Well, here is a list --

Actually, I don't see much change in the squabbling – just in the subject of the squabble.

**Greater forbearance** – I am hopeful. The Reverend **Margaret J. Thomas\*** HR, in ARE WE DEATHLY ILL? - GOVERNANCE IN A TIME OF FERMENT, February 2011 observes:

“Nor is disagreement in our denomination new – as the Synods of Philadelphia and New York united in 1758 they included provision for dissent and mutual forbearance in such times”

This provision survives in our *Book of Order*, today:

“That when any matter is determined by a majority vote, every member shall either actively concur with or passively submit to such determination; or if his conscious permit him to do neither, he shall, after sufficient liberty modestly to reason and remonstrate, peacefully withdraw from our communion without making any attempt to make any schism. Provided always that this shall be understood to extend only to such determination as the body shall judge indispensable in doctrine or Presbyterian government.” (G-2.0105 , footnote)

While **splitting** is a possibility, it does not seem to be the current model – Margaret continues in her article:

Since then, each new presenting, divisive issue – confessional standards, essential tenets, the education of clergy, the dismantling of the vestiges of slavery and segregation, the role of the church in society, civil rights, divorced men as ordained officers, the inclusion of women in ordained offices, and most recently human sexuality – has been bolstered by a rehashing of the same debates regarding biblical authority, Christology, the extent of salvation, the nature of our confessional documents, and what is an essential tenet.

Time and time again the General Assemblies of the church have listened patiently, considered overtures, and appointed committees to counsel with those holding minority views.

Time after time General Assemblies have dismissed particular analyses of the presenting issues, refuted a biblical interpretation, or rejected an interpretation of Reformed theology or polity.

Usually a consensus emerges and our corporate life is reaffirmed.

More recently, however, rather than submitting to the judgments of the church or continuing to reason and remonstrate, those holding minority views have established parallel para-church systems, diverted their funding and leadership to affinity groups or entities outside the structures of the denomination, and at times fermented schism.

Both predecessor denominations of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) experienced schism (*aside* -- and we have seen these departures on the worms chart several times) shortly before their 1983 reunion. *But even after these schisms, people holding thought patterns similar to those who left remain in the denomination.*

- Perhaps they are members who had been taught by the schismatics;
- perhaps they are people who entered our membership and leadership unaware of the positions the denomination has taken over the centuries;
- perhaps their seminaries and congregations failed to teach them our Reformed beliefs and polity;
- perhaps they have never engaged in a deliberative process based upon mutual forbearance during times of discernment, as the way we live in the midst of our diversity as believers;
- perhaps they seek to control the denomination and impose their beliefs on

- others; or
- perhaps their values, beliefs, and attitudes have always been more compatible with other expressions of the Christian faith.

**Lose members.** You remember the downward trends on Jack Marcum's on numbers chart a couple of Sundays ago. Elder **Steve Salyards,\*\*** blogging away in May this year observes:

Reality Check - The theological controversy is not the only membership decline issue

Frequently in the PC(USA) we hear that the denomination is losing members because of the internal controversies. Well, it is probably a bit more complicated than that.

If we look at the [summary of comparative statistics for 2009](#), the most recent year that is available, we can first make a rough estimate of the replacement capacity of the PC(USA). In 2009 there were 20,501 individuals, age 17 and under, that joined the church by affirmation of faith. This is effectively the "internal gain," that is the kids that come through the system from member families. This represents a 1.0% membership gain for 2009. This is offset by those that leave the rolls due to their new membership in the Church Triumphant, that is, those that have died. For 2009 that was 32,827 or a loss of 1.5% of the membership. So the net of -0.5% represents the church's inability to replace its membership internally.

The other thing is that all of the mainline churches are declining in membership. But within this decline there is a difference in the rates of decline relative to the strength of internal controversy in the churches. For the six traditional "mainline" denominations that make the [National Council of Churches 25 largest](#) list, the less contentious United Methodist Church and American Baptist Churches in the USA declined by 1.01% and 1.55% respectively. The three with more heated internal controversy had larger declines: PC(USA) declined 2.61%, the Episcopal Church declined 2.48%, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America declined 1.96%. It would suggest that we could attribute at least 1%, and probably a bit more, of the PC(USA)'s decline to the internal controversy itself. But that is only about half the total decline with the other half broken into about one-third the lack of internal replacement and about two-thirds the general decline in the mainline and the trend towards non-denominationalism.

Now the case can be made that these three factors are nothing more than different facets of the same general problem that the mainline faces -- a

younger generation [that] shuns the "institutional" nature of the church with its continuing controversies in a hierarchical setting and their departure for the non-denominational ... [that] raises the median age and decreases the birthrate [in the mainlines]. However, the apparent correlation of membership declines with internal controversy is striking but not a complete explanation.

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- The Rev. **Margaret J. Thomas** has served the Presbyterian Church in a variety of roles over many years. Now honorably retired and living in Minneapolis, she was the Deputy Executive Director of the UPC/GAMC, and then executive of the Synod of Lakes and Prairies. She then served as executive of the Minnesota Council of Churches, and during that time she became a member and moderator of both the GA Permanent Judicial Commission and the Advisory Committee on the Constitution. Out of this broad and deep experience, she offers some of her insights on the proposed new Form of Government – both describing its positive aspects and pointing to two proposed changes that could undermine the whole distinctive style of governance in the Presbyterian Church (USA).
  - \*\* The PCUSA's favorite statistician, Elder **Steve Salyards** (a Ruling Elder at La Verne Heights Presbyterian Church (PCUSA) in the Angeles Foothills) of The GA Junkie, has been [tracking and commenting](#) on statistics for the PCUSA as well as the wider church for a number of years.

## *What are **my** options?*

- Do nothing – (always an option)
- Ignore the controversies
- Engage the controversies,
  - Stay in the congregation
  - Leave the congregation
  - Leave the denomination

So – on to the second question: “where shall I go?” – the more personal one.

Here is a list of options:

**You could do nothing.** The “do nothing” option is one which always exists, is usually taken, but is seldom explored before deciding. As you are assured by the denominational leaders – and by our leaders here at FPC, nothing will change much in the foreseeable future, you may not even notice the denominational changes in your personal or church-related life. So this might be the best option.

(Now that you know about them) – You could choose to **ignore the controversies**. Again, they probably won’t touch you or your personal or church life.

Or – you could **engage the controversies** – and

Stay in the congregation,

Leave the congregation for a more comfortable worship experience, or even

Leave the denomination!

(but with no change foreseen, why do either of these?)



## So, where are **we going** from here?

(Let's be sure to ask the right questions ...)

- So, where is **the PCUSA going** from here?
- So, where **shall I go** from here?

Even in these times of great uncertainty over all of this, (in the words of that great American Astronaut and Theologian, Buzz Lightyear):

-- we can be certain of one thing -- we are going!

And in his words ...

*“to infinity ... and beyond!”*



... because -- in any case, we are GOING!

## Equipping the Saints ...

- **Saturday, November 5<sup>th</sup> 2011** – 8:30am to 3:30pm
- First Presbyterian Church – Las Vegas!
- The Reverend Karl Travis, Guest Speaker, GA Council committee chair:

### **How To Integrate Generational Theory Into Leadership Formation**

- Plus -- five afternoon workshops!

Don't forget Equipping the Saints – Saturday, November 5<sup>th</sup> from 8:30 to 3:30 – right here!

-- And --

Don't forget to sign up for the "Take a Look" breakfast!

## Next Week ...

- Peter's version of the run-up to 1982...
- Our Denomination's organizational history and its context
- The "my" stories – Nevada's story – FPC's story
- What has the Reunion done for us?
- And what do we believe ... now?
- Where are we – and where are we going?

**... Take A Look!**

And that brings us to the end of today's lesson on what we confess to believe as a denomination – at least as of today!

Thanks for a great five weeks (for me) – and with Peter in the saddle for week one, I hope it was a good six weeks for you!

Let's close in prayer.