

A BRIEF HISTORY OF PRESBYTERIANISM: CHURCH LIFE IN A LARGE FAMILY

L. ROY TAYLOR

The Kyzer family reunion was an impressive experience for me as an eight-year-old child. My mother's side of the family gathered at a park in Tuscaloosa, Alabama for a picnic and reminiscences several decades ago. I had a lot of cousins (sixteen to be exact), but at that gathering I realize my family was much larger than previously thought, four generations of the people who looked, thought, and behaved like each other to varying degrees. Then, when there was talk of ancestors long dead, I knew I came from an even larger family with deep roots. The Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) is the second largest Presbyterian denomination in the USA and is relatively young as far as denominations go (begun in 1973). While Presbyterians are a small minority of Christians in America, *we need to realize we are part of something bigger than we think.*

Our Church family has deep roots, not only back to the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century, but back to the Early Church and even into Old Testament (OT) era. It is our understanding from Scripture that the Church is composed of all the people whom He has chosen to call unto Himself. Our *Westminster Confession of Faith* puts it this way, "The catholic or universal Church, which is invisible, consists of the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the Head thereof; and is the spouse, the body the fullness of Him that filleth all in all."¹ The Church then is not just New Testament (NT) believers, but all who are saved by Christ, both before and after Christ's incarnation and redemption.² Key biblical texts on this issue are Romans 4 and Galatians 3 where the Scriptures teach that all believers (both Old and New Testaments) are justified by faith

alone in God's Anointed Redeemer and that all who trust in Christ are spiritual descendants of Abraham. This deep-roots understanding of the Church has several significant implications. That is why we prefer to speak of a "biblical Church," spanning and based upon both OT and NT Scriptures rather than a "New Testament Church" not beginning until the NT and based on NT Scriptures only. This means that the whole Bible, not just the NT is for us. Covenant Theology may simply (perhaps simplistically) be expressed by the statement, "In the OT, God was faithful to His people as families, not just as individuals; in the NT God is still faithful to His people as families, not just as individuals." That is why we practice covenant baptism of our children. Moreover, we see continuity between the Passover of the OT and the sacrament of communion (the Lord's Supper) in the NT. So the rites of our family have deep roots.

We call ourselves "Presbyterians" because we have a representative and connectional form of church government in a Church governed by elders (*presbuteroi*). Collegial leadership by a plurality of elders began in the days of Moses (Numbers 11), was enhanced in the synagogue movement beginning in the 6th century BC, was continued in the NT (Acts 14:23) as the apostolic practice, continued until the mid-2nd century AD, and was restored by John Calvin and John Knox in the Reformation of the 16th century.³ So the system by which our family is managed has deep roots as well, both biblically and historically.

Just as there are strong physical resemblances in extended families, there are certain beliefs held by all branches of the Christian family. These common beliefs are expressed in such ancient creeds as the *Apostles Creed* and the *Nicene Creed*. When we confess our faith in common worship by affirming these creeds in congregational unison, we are confessing the beliefs of the extended family for millennia. We are heirs to the "Great Tradition," the universal historical theological consensus of the Church. We respect the three-fold standard of acceptable Tradition stated by Vincent of

Dr. Taylor's article continued in printed book. See next page for first two pages of Dr. Dunahoo's article.

PASSING ON THE PCA DISTINCTIVES TO THE NEXT GENERATION

CHARLES DUNAHOO

As the Coordinator of Christian Education and Publications and as one who was involved in the development of the Presbyterian Church in America, I am often asked, “What is distinctive about the PCA? Why did you leave the mainline denomination to form a smaller one?” There are multitudes of denominations of all stripes. That’s nothing new (although denominationalism is basically a modern, Western phenomenon).

It is good to ask these questions to see how our past impacts our present and future. During my years of serving the church, I have seen that the PCA has meant somewhat different things to different people. I believe there are five areas that distinguish the PCA. In describing them I do not want simply to major on the past, as though it were isolated from the present.

First, The PCA is first and foremost committed to the triune God revealed in the Bible, and committed to the Bible as the “only rule of faith and life.” **Second**, the PCA is a confessional church. Its basic beliefs are reflected in those doctrines set forth in the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, and the *Larger* and *Shorter Catechisms*. **Third**, the PCA is a connectional church, as implied by the word “Presbyterian.” Not only are individual Christians added to the church, the body of Christ, but also each church is connected with other similar churches. **Fourth**, the PCA takes seriously the idea of the parity of elders. Governance in the Presbyterian system is shared, not hierarchical. And, **fifth**, the PCA has intentionally taken the great commission of our Lord most seriously. There are other things that are unique about the PCA, but these are the five that primarily answer the questions above. Let’s consider them more fully.

THE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE

First, the PCA recognizes the authority of the Bible. That authority is contained in the Old and New Testaments, which we believe to be the inspired and inerrant Word of God. We take the Bible seriously. There is no equivocation on the concept that the Bible is the authoritative and revealed will of God for His people. We believe it contains special revealed truth about the Triune God that we will not find in any other source. It tells us what God wants us to know and to believe. (*WCF*, I)

Because truth matters and is more than subjective opinion, God selected and led “holy men” to write the Word of God. The Bible is true because it is God’s Word and it is God’s Word because it is true. Attempts to undermine the Bible’s authority are always before the church—our enemy sees to that. Nonetheless, we can be pleased to be a part of a church that takes the Bible seriously. As a matter of historical fact, we are the first Presbyterian denomination to require all elders and deacons to affirm by a vow that they believe the Bible to be the inerrant and inspired Word of God (*Book of Church Order*, 24-5). It is not simply men’s words about God, but God speaking through His Spirit. We believe that the Holy Spirit who inspired the authors to write these words works in people’s lives to open their minds and hearts to God’s truth revealed in the Bible.

Though we do not believe the Bible contains all of God’s truth (He has written another book—general revelation). We believe the Bible is our standard for faith and life (*WCF* I, 2). It is the plumb line by which we judge all matters of religion and life. Because the Bible is God’s book, we say without hesitation that anything that contradicts the Bible (properly interpreted) is wrong. God’s Word is true.

The authority of Scripture was important to the PCA in 1973 but does it matter today?

Yes, and perhaps more so as postmodernism emphasizes that truth is relative or is whatever you want it to be. A well-known Harvard law professor said “you cannot know what is right, you can only

Dr. Dunahoo's article continued in printed book. See next page for first two pages of Dr. Gilchrist's article.

OUR CHURCH'S GOVERNING STRUCTURE

PAUL R. GILCHRIST

The genius of Presbyterianism is “rule by elders.” Indeed, the name Presbyterian derives from the Greek word *πρεσβυτηρος* (*presbuteros*) meaning “elder.” It is found in the New Testament almost always in the plural, suggesting several or many elders. 1 Timothy 5:17 suggests two kinds of elders, those who rule and those who also teach, from which we derive the titles for Ruling Elders and Teaching Elders respectively. All the elders in a church are involved in governing, but there are some of these who also have been ordained as pastors and teachers, and therefore called Teaching Elders. In the governance of the Church, there is parity in Ruling Elders and Teaching Elders which means each one has an equal vote, no one has veto power over the others.

The form of government that Presbyterians have adopted is that of elders elected by the members of the congregation to represent them in governing the church. This is in contrast to a democratic form where the people rule in every aspect of their church structure. This generally is the form followed by Congregationalist and Baptist churches.

Our Presbyterian form of governance contrasts with the more hierarchical governance of churches like the Episcopal, Methodist, and Roman Catholic. These churches have bishops, archbishops, or popes who exercise sole authority over the church. This type of governance is comparable to a monarchy.

However, in the Presbyterian system we have elected representatives to govern under the authority of God. In this they reflect the republican or representative governance which combines the best of the democratic ideals and of the hierarchical structures. Thus elders are “under shepherds” of the flock, under the authority of the “Chief Shepherd” Jesus Christ.

DUTIES AND QUALIFICATIONS OF ELDERS

Elders are overseers (or bishops). Their primary duty is “*to care for the church of God which he obtained with his own blood*” (Acts 20:28). This is to say, they are to feed and tend the flock which is a ministry of teaching and training, encouragement and consolation, warning and correction. The apostle Peter expands this by giving the manner and the motive for this responsibility by saying: “*Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, serving as overseers-- not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.*” (1 Peter 5:2-3 NIV).

The apostle Paul points to the high qualifications that elders must meet. In 1 Timothy 3:2-7, he gives a list of requirements:

A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, temperate, sober-minded, of good behavior, hospitable, able to teach; not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money, but gentle, not quarrelsome, not covetous; one who rules his own house well, having his children in submission with all reverence (for if a man does not know how to rule his own house, how will he take care of the church of God?); not a novice, lest being puffed up with pride he fall into the same condemnation as the devil. Moreover he must have a good testimony among those who are outside, lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil. (NKJV).

The Constitution of the PCA reflects these Biblical qualifications in the *Book of Church Order (BCO)* 8-2:

“He that fills this office should possess a competency of human learning and be blameless in life, sound in the faith and apt to teach. He should exhibit a sobriety and holiness of life becoming the Gospel. He should rule his own