

## Treasures of the Book of Order

### Reflections on Three Sections Prepared for the Review of Records Gathering

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## F-3.02

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) reaffirms, within the context of its commitment to the Church universal, a special commitment to basic principles of Presbyterian polity:

### *F-3.0201 One Church*

The particular congregations<sup>d</sup> of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) wherever they are, taken collectively, constitute one church, called the church.

### *F-3.0202 Governed by Presbyters*

This church shall be governed by presbyters, that is, ruling elders and teaching elders (also called ministers of the Word and Sacrament). Ruling elders are so named not because they “lord it over” the congregation (Matt. 20:25), but because they are chosen by the congregation to discern and guide in its fidelity to the Word of God, and to strengthen and nurture its faith and life. Ministers of the Word and Sacrament shall be committed in all their work to teaching the faith in word and in deed and equipping the people of God for their ministry and witness.

### *F-3.0203 Gathered in Councils*

These presbyters shall come together in councils in regular gradation. These councils are sessions, presbyteries, synods, and the General Assembly. All councils of the church are united by the nature of the church and share with one another responsibilities, rights, and powers as provided in this Constitution. The councils are distinct, but have such mutual relations that the act of one of them is the act of the whole church performed by it through the appropriate council. The larger part of the church, or a representation thereof, shall govern the smaller.

### *F-3.0204 Seek and Represent the Will of Christ*

Presbyters are not simply to reflect the will of the people, but rather to seek together to find and represent the will of Christ.

### *F-3.0205 Decision by Majority Vote*

Decisions shall be reached in councils by vote, following opportunity for discussion and discernment, and a majority shall govern.

When we look at F-3.02, one principle that is abundantly clear is the connectional nature of our church. This is reflected in various provisions. For example, we are all one church, gathered in various congregations (F-3.0201). This differs from the way we usually talk about

“our church” as just the local congregation. Additionally, a larger part of the church governs the smaller part, which provides for uniformity throughout the church (F-3.0203).

The connectional nature of the Presbyterian church is guided by Scripture. In Jesus’s prayer with his disciples just before his execution, recorded in John 17, he prays four times for the unity of the church! Given Jesus’s emphasis “that they should be one,” we should not take lightly church division and we should consider Jesus’s words against the current trend for churches to operate as solo missions. Additionally, reflect that in Acts 15, the decision to bring in Gentiles was a church-wide decision, not a decision congregations made on their own. Think also of Paul’s letters—for instance, he took the liberty of writing and giving advice to the church in Rome, where he hadn’t even visited! And, in 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, and Romans, Paul took up a collection for the Jerusalem church, which they probably didn’t even know anyone from, urging the church to think of itself as a whole rather than just the local churches.

We can also see in F-3.02 the inherent conservatism of the Presbyterian system. I do not mean this in any way as a political conservatism, but a tendency to seek the consensus of the larger church in important matters rather than simply forging ahead. The theological reason for this may very well be our emphasis in the Reformed tradition to recognize the disfiguring influence of sin and so to seek the will of God carefully in all things, and not just what is good for me or my congregation.

In F-3.02 there is also reflected the priesthood of all believers, as described in 1 Peter 2:5-9. Leadership throughout the Presbyterian church is shared between laity and clergy, in equal numbers of laity and clergy to the extent possible. Our tradition emphasizes that all people

are created in image and likeness of God. Therefore we are wary of having one person acting as God's representative alone. Governance by majority vote serves as a check on the possibility of abuse of power by one individual.

## **G-3.02**

### *G-3.0201 Composition and Responsibilities*

The session is the council for the congregation. It shall be composed of those persons elected by the congregation to active service <sup>d</sup> as ruling elders, together with all installed pastors and associate pastors. All members of the session are entitled to vote. The pastor shall be the moderator of the session, and the session shall not meet without the pastor or designated moderator. If there is no installed pastor, or if the installed pastor is unable to invite another moderator, the presbytery shall make provisions for a moderator. Presbyteries shall provide by rule for moderators when the session is without a moderator for reasons of vacancy or inconvenience.

The session shall have responsibility for governing the congregation <sup>e</sup> and guiding its witness to the sovereign activity of God in the world, so that the congregation is and becomes a community of faith, hope, love, and witness. As it leads and guides the witness of the congregation, the session shall keep before it the marks of the Church (F-1.0302), the notes by which Presbyterian and Reformed congregations have identified themselves throughout history (F-1.0303) and the six Great Ends of the Church (F-1.0304).

In light of this charge, the session has responsibility and power to:

a. *provide that the Word of God may be truly preached and heard.* This responsibility shall include providing a place where the congregation may regularly gather for worship, education, and spiritual nurture; providing for regular preaching of the Word by a minister of the Word and Sacrament or other person prepared and approved for the work; planning and leading regular efforts to reach into the community and the world with the message of salvation and the invitation to enter into committed discipleship; planning and leading ministries of social healing and reconciliation in the community in accordance with the prophetic witness of Jesus Christ; and initiating and responding to ecumenical efforts that bear witness to the love and grace of God.

b. *provide that the Sacraments may be rightly administered and received.* This responsibility shall include authorizing the celebration of the Lord's Supper at least quarterly and the administration of Baptism as appropriate, in accordance with the principles of the Directory for Worship; and exercising pastoral care among the congregation in order that the Sacraments may be received as a means of grace, and the congregation may live in the unity represented in the Sacraments.

c. *nurture the covenant community of disciples of Christ.* This responsibility shall include receiving and dismissing members; reviewing the roll of active members at least annually and counseling with those who have neglected the responsibilities of membership; providing programs of nurture, education, and fellowship; training, examining, ordaining, and installing those elected by the congregation as ruling elders and deacons; encouraging the graces of generosity and faithful stewardship of personal and financial resources; managing the physical property of the congregation for the furtherance of its mission; directing the ministry of deacons, trustees, and all organizations of the congregation; employing the administrative staff of the congregation; leading the congregation in participating in the mission of the whole church; warning and bearing witness against error in doctrine and immorality in practice within the congregation and community; and serving in judicial matters in accordance with the Rules of Discipline <sup>f</sup>.

The Presbyterian session is another example of the inherent conservatism of our tradition, the desire to reach a consensus of the elders before acting. In the Session, Presbyterians seek the kind of sharing of knowledge, tradition, and wisdom that Moses sought when his father-in-law advised him to appoint elders among the people to help him govern. Exodus 18.

Additionally, we see reflected in the Session the idea of calling or election that is so important in Scripture. There is one body, and many members, and we don't all have the same calling. God calls certain people to a particular role of leadership in the church which is the calling of the ruling elder. It is not the calling of every member of the body and indeed there are other callings which are just as important to God's mission.

Note that the moderator of Session must be a teaching elder or pastor. As the pastor is "shepherd of the flock," this makes sense because the moderator or chair of any meeting has a position of neutrality. The pastor has a role of caregiving of all the congregation and so in the role of moderator of Session the pastor can help the congregation to move forward as the Session discerns God's will while also seeking to maintain that unity of the spirit in the bond of peace.

G-3.02 lists the marks of the true church: the Word rightly preached, the Sacraments rightly administered, and the nurture of the covenant community. The Word preached is God's communication with us, while the sacraments are the outward sign of our relationship with God. The nurturing of the covenant community, including discipline (the root of disciple and discipline is, of course, the same) furthers that unity of purpose and unity of life that is Jesus's prayer for the church.

Looking at these three marks of the church, they are fundamentally grace-based. This is very refreshing to me. The marks of the true church are not having a big budget or a growing membership. In fact, as we consider why we would even think of numbers as the marks of whether a church is doing well, there is the world's influence in looking at a church in only that way. Our Book of Order points to the essence of church as being relational, our relationship with God and one another, that our sessions are called to focus their prayer, attention, and effort to furthering in the covenant community.

Finally I will defend G-3.02's emphasis on doing everything decently and in order, that line from 1 Corinthians 14:40 that Presbyterians have been accused of taking a little too seriously. Fundamentally, order is about transparency, having a process by which we do things that is consistent and fair to everyone. That's rooted in respect for the body, for all the members of the church. If we used different processes for different persons or situations, we would violate the image of God that is in every person. The emphasis on process therefore is really about respect.

## **W-3.04**

### **W-3.0409 : Theology of the Lord's Supper**

The Lord's Supper (or Eucharist) is the sign and seal of our communion with the crucified and risen Lord. Jesus shared meals with his followers throughout his earthly life and ministry—common suppers, miraculous feasts, and the covenant commemorations of the people of God. Jesus spoke of himself as the bread of life, and the true vine, in whom we are branches. On the night before his death, Jesus shared bread and wine with his disciples. He spoke of the bread and wine as his body and blood, signs of the new covenant and told the disciples to remember him by keeping this feast. On the day of his resurrection, Jesus made himself known to his disciples in the breaking of the bread. The disciples continued to devote themselves to the apostles' teaching, fellowship, prayers, and the common meal. As Paul wrote, when we share the bread and cup in Jesus' name, "we who are many are one body" (1 Cor. 10:17).

The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper offers an abundant feast of theological meaning, including: thanksgiving to God the Father; remembrance of Jesus Christ; invocation of the Holy Spirit; communion in the body of Christ; and a meal of the realm of God. The Reformed tradition understands the Lord's Supper to be a sign of God's covenant. The bread of the Lord's Supper is linked with the bread of Passover and the gift of manna in the wilderness. The Lord's Supper thus connects us with God's saving power and

providential care from generation to generation. Like the offering of sacrifices, a sign of Israel's thanksgiving for God's faithfulness, the Lord's Supper is a sacrifice of praise and a sign of our gratitude for God's steadfast love. The Lord's Supper represents God's gracious invitation to an everlasting covenant. The Lord's Supper also reflects our calling to feed others as we have been fed, and offers a foretaste of that heavenly banquet when God will wipe away every tear and swallow up death forever.

The Lord's Supper enacts and seals what the Word proclaims: God's sustaining grace offered to all people. The Lord's Supper is at once God's gift of grace, God's means of grace, and God's call to respond to that grace. Through the Lord's Supper, Jesus Christ nourishes us in righteousness, faithfulness, and discipleship. Through the Lord's Supper, the Holy Spirit renews the Church in its identity and sends the Church to mission in the world.

When we gather at the Lord's Supper the Spirit draws us into Christ's presence and unites with the Church in every time and place. We join with all the faithful in heaven and on earth in offering thanksgiving to the triune God. We reaffirm the promises of our baptism and recommit ourselves to love and serve God, one another, and our neighbors in the world.

The opportunity to eat and drink with Christ is not a right bestowed upon the worthy, but a privilege given to the undeserving who come in faith, repentance, and love. All who come to the table are offered the bread and cup, regardless of their age or understanding. If some of those who come have not yet been baptized, an invitation to baptismal preparation and Baptism should be graciously extended.

Worshippers prepare themselves to celebrate the Lord's Supper by putting their trust in Christ, confessing their sin, and seeking reconciliation with God and one another. Even those who doubt may come to the table in order to be assured of God's love and grace in Jesus Christ.

The Lord's Supper shall be celebrated as a regular part of the Service for the Lord's Day, preceded by the proclamation of the Word, in the gathering of the people of God. When local circumstances call for the Lord's Supper to be celebrated less frequently, the session may approve other schedules for celebration, in no case less than quarterly. If the Lord's Supper is celebrated less frequently than on each Lord's Day, public notice is to be given at least one week in advance so that all may prepare to receive the Sacrament.

### **W-3.0410: Responsibility for the Lord's Supper**

The Lord's Supper shall be authorized by the session and administered by a minister of the Word and Sacrament†. It is appropriate that a presbytery authorize and train ruling elders to administer the Lord's Supper in the event of the absence of pastors ([G-3.0301b](#)). The session may authorize the celebration of the Lord's Supper at events other than the Service for the Lord's Day, including services of Christian marriage, ordination and installation, services of wholeness, ministry to the sick, and services of witness to the resurrection. At all such events, the Word is to be read and proclaimed. When the Lord's Supper takes place apart from public worship, the congregation shall be represented by one or more members.

A council may authorize the celebration of the Lord's Supper in certain contexts beyond the congregational setting, such as hospitals, prisons, schools, military bases, or other ministry settings ([G-3.02](#), [G-3.03](#)).

### **W-3.0412: Great Thanksgiving**

Following the offering and the preparation of the table, a minister of the Word and Sacrament† invites worshippers to the Lord's Supper using sentences of Scripture. At the table, facing the people, the minister of the Word and Sacrament† shall lead the people in a prayer to the triune God: giving thanks for God's creative power, providential care, and covenant faithfulness, along with particular blessings of the day; remembering God's acts of salvation through Jesus' birth, life, death, resurrection, ascension, and promised return, as well as Jesus' institution of the Sacrament (if not otherwise spoken at the invitation to the table or the breaking of the bread); and calling on the Holy Spirit to draw worshippers into the presence of the risen

Lord, nourish them in the body and blood of Christ, unite them with Christ in the communion of saints and the Church in every place, and send them in mission to the world. The prayer ends with praise to the triune God. Musical acclamations, such as "Holy, holy, holy," "Christ has died," and "Amen," may be included. The Lord's Prayer follows.

### **W-3.0413: Breaking the Bread**

At the table, in full view of the people, the minister of the Word and Sacrament† breaks the bread and pours the cup, or lifts a cup that has already been filled. These actions may be accompanied by sentences of Scripture or performed in silence. The use of one loaf and one cup expresses the unity of the body of Christ and the communal nature of the Sacrament. The bread used for the Lord's Supper should be common to the culture of the congregation; those who prepare the bread shall make provision for the full participation of the congregation. The session will determine whether wine is used; a non-alcoholic option shall be provided and clearly identified.

### **W-3.0414: Communion**

The bread and cup are shared in the manner most appropriate to the occasion. Worshipers may gather at the table, come forward to meet the servers, or receive the bread and cup where they are. The bread may be broken and placed in people's hands or they may receive pieces of bread prepared for distribution. They may drink from a common cup, receive individual cups, or dip the broken bread into the cup. Ordinarily ruling elders, deacons, and ministers of the Word and Sacrament† serve the bread and cup; the session may authorize other church members to do so. While the bread and cup are shared worshipers may sing, other music may be offered, appropriate passages of Scripture may be read, or the people may pray in silence.

When all have received the bread and cup the remaining elements are placed on the table. The minister of the Word and Sacrament† then leads the people in prayer, thanking God for the gift of the Sacrament and asking for grace to live and serve faithfully until the coming of Christ's realm in fullness.

As soon as possible after the service (ordinarily on the same day), the bread and cup may be shared with absent, homebound, or hospitalized members by two or more persons in ordered ministry. Those who carry out this extended service of communion shall be authorized by the session; equipped with the necessary theological, pastoral, and liturgical gifts and resources; and instructed to maintain the unity of Word and Sacrament through the reading of Scripture and offering of prayers.

At the conclusion of the Service for the Lord's Day, the bread and cup are to be removed from the table and used or disposed of in a manner approved by the session, in keeping with the Reformed understanding of the Sacrament and principles of good stewardship. This may be accomplished by consuming what remains or returning the elements to the earth.

When we look at the Book of Order regarding the Lord's Supper, it is in keeping with John Calvin's own writings about the Sacrament that we tend to use verbs, not nouns, to describe what God does in this holy moment. We do not focus on "but is the bread changed?" because Jesus's call is that we should be changed! Our focus is not on the people or the elements or the building but on God's action in us. Our tradition turns always to the sovereignty of God and so it is God's action we stand in awe of during the Lord's Supper.

It's important in our tradition that age or understanding not a barrier to participation in communion. This goes back to the priesthood of all believers and our belief in everyone being created in the image of God. As a person who has people with disabilities in my family it's often been a comfort to me to know that the Presbyterian tradition is that none of us can fully understand what God does in communion, so we allow people of young age and limited understanding to participate as God calls them.

At the same time communion is authorized by the Session. In our tradition ministers do not preside over the communion table on our own but as an act of the whole church, so Session or another council always authorizes the sacrament. Note also that communion is to be integral to the service for the Lord's Day. It is the outward and visible sign of God's grace and central to our worship. Whenever communion is celebrated the Word of God is also proclaimed, to unite the Sacrament with God's Word to us. That's because worship is about God's action, God's deepening relationship with us, which we did nothing to deserve, it is God's free gift. The Word and Sacrament complement one another in our worship.

I hope these reflections from the Book of Order will lead you to further reflection on this resource. We tend to think of the Book of Order as very dry and just a bunch of rules, but as I hope you have seen from this brief example, it is actually a rich resource for our shared ministry. Sessions would do well to periodically read sections of the Book of Order and reflect together, perhaps after opening devotions, to help center and guide their work in our Reformed tradition and polity.