

The Uniqueness of PCA Polity

L. Roy Taylor
Stated Clerk, PCA

Church polity, like worship, (*WCF* I-6) is affected by a complex of several factors:

- Christ is the Head and King of the Church (contra papacy and secular monarchs).
- The Bible.
 - Biblical commands – We trace the beginnings of Presbyterian polity to the biblical commands given through Moses (Numbers 11) and the Apostle Paul (Titus 1:5) for the institution of and the necessity of the office of elder.
 - Biblical principles – For example, the doctrine of the Church affects one’s view of the connectional nature of polity.
 - Biblical precedents – We trace the office of deacon not to a biblical command, but to a biblical precedent (Acts 6) when the apostles decided to appoint seven to oversee the care of widows in the Jerusalem Church. Evidently, this had roots in the synagogue system which had “almoners” to distribute alms.¹
- Culture – national, regional, ethnic, local. (Episcopal polity is similar in some respects to the Roman government. Contemporary polity is modeled to a degree after an MBA business model). The PCA originated out of Southern Presbyterianism, which by the nature of the case had an aversion to centralized authority and had a strong emphasis on authority in the lower levels of the Church. Parliamentary procedure, as we practice it, has British origins and American embellishments. As our presbyteries and sessions become less uniquely Anglo, there has been less emphasis on procedures. Another factor is that the present generation is more relational than prior generations.
- Reason (logic, common sense and “sanctified pragmatism”).
 - Use of reason in the good and necessary consequence of biblical principles (*WCF* I-6).
 - Use of reason in situations where there are not biblical commands, as long as the general principles of scripture are observed.
- History & Experience – recent or remote, positive or negative (tend to duplicate the positive and react against the negative, [the pendulum effect]). The experience of conservatives in the last few decades prior to the formation of the PCA was to work through para-church agencies, because of the theological decline of the PCUS. In a sense, the Committees and Agencies of the PCA were structured to resemble para-church ministries.
- Role of laity – Participation of laity on an autocratic-democratic continuum. That is affected not only by the basic form of polity, but also by culture. American church polity is usually more democratic.
- Size of local congregation, area judicatories, networks, and highest judicatories. Small = simple organization, and structure. Large = more complex.

¹ Jewish piety had three foci; prayer, the study of scripture, and almsgiving (care for the poor). It is interesting that the apostles appointed the seven to care for the poor so that the apostles might devote themselves to prayer and the ministry of the word.

- Mission – simple or complex. Polity tends to reflect breadth of the mission. Para-church organizations tend to have a narrower mission than churches (e.g., Child Evangelism Fellowship focuses only on evangelizing children). Denominations have broader missions to fulfill the multifaceted mission of the Church, not just doing evangelism of a segment of the population.
- Personality of present leaders or movement founders – Calvin was not only a preacher, theologian and exegete; he was a visionary leader and capable administrator. Part of the challenge the PCA faces today is that many of the PCA founding fathers were concerned as churchmen to develop a denomination, but many of their successors focus their attention, resources, and time almost exclusively on local church or affinity group ministries.
- Legal considerations – Some churches exist in restrictive situations (e.g., China, Saudi Arabia). In America legal liabilities need to be considered. Some states are more hospitable to unincorporated churches than others. Legal considerations now come into play in church discipline.

We do not claim that every minute detail of our polity has, or even must have, a biblical proof text.²

The Essence of Presbyterian Church Government.

The Presbyterian system of church government is a *biblical, representative, and connectional* system. Presbyterians do not believe that they are the only Christians, or that churches with other types of Church Government are not valid Christian churches. Presbyterians do believe, however, that the Presbyterian, biblical, representative, and connectional system is that which conforms most consistently to the Scriptures.

Presbyterian Church Government is *biblical* because it is based on biblical directives and principles drawn from both the Old and New Testaments (not just the New Testament). The historical development of Church Government is informative, but not determinative for us. Both our form of government and our theology are based on the entire Bible.

Presbyterian Church Government is *representative* because the people choose their spiritual leaders to govern the church (its members and officers) on the local, regional, and national levels. We practice mutual accountability and discipline through our representative government.

Presbyterian Church Government is *connectional*; local churches see themselves as part of the larger Church. We hold to (1) a common binding doctrinal, confessional standard of the Reformed Faith, the *Westminster Standards* (2) mutual accountability and

² For example, having committees (or “teams”), differentiating between committees and commissions, differentiating pastors, associate pastors, and assistant pastors, having licentiates and interns, distinguishing between complaints and appeals, setting deadlines for complaints and appeals, how often the session must meet, and many other details of our polity are based on the complex of principles rather than individual biblical proof texts.

discipline, and (3) cooperative ministry. Local churches, no matter what size they may be, do not minister best alone, but in cooperation with the larger Church. We engage in cooperative ministry as a body of churches to carry out the Great Commission Christ gave to the Church.

The degree and manner in which these characteristics are expressed varies from denomination to denomination. Denominations with continental Reformed roots have structures and procedures different from Presbyterians. The PCUSA is certainly more centralized than the PCA.

The strengths of any system of polity are often the weaknesses of that system.

For example, one of the strengths of the Presbyterian system is collegial leadership through a plurality of elders. That provides the “wisdom in many counselors,” but it may be time-consuming. One of the strengths of the Presbyterian system is the opportunity to carry a controversy to a higher church court. That is also a weakness because as long as a case is filed in proper form and within the proper time frame, the court has little or no ability to deny *certiorari*.

The experience that the founders of the PCA had in the PCUS was similar to the experiences of conservative-evangelical-orthodox believers in many mainline Protestant denominations. The plot line was the same; the cast of characters and place names were different. The plot line is

1. A decline in theological orthodoxy.
2. A decline in discipline.
3. An abuse of ecclesiastical power.

The PCA polity of the PCA was developed through the application of the complex of principles stated above. So, the PCA shares general principles of basic Presbyterian polity, but has distinctive features. Some of those distinctive features are:

1. A deliberate decision not to have a hierarchal, coercive system. The polity of the PCA is “grass-roots” polity, “non-hierarchal Presbyterianism.”
2. Return to Eight Preliminary Principles instituted in the 18th century formation of the Presbyterian Church in this country, *which principles control interpretation of the entire BCO.* “The Presbyterian Church in America, in setting forth the form of government founded upon and agreeable to the Word of God, reiterates the following great principles which have governed the formation of the plan.” See the Preface to the *BCO*. The Preliminary Principles are not merely an historical introduction to the *BCO* but are part of the constitution,
3. A non-comprehensive Book of Church Order -- The PCA *BCO* is not written in exhaustive detail to cover virtually every possible situation, but is, primarily a set of principles, to be applied by the lower church courts (Sessions and Presbyteries) using their own good judgment and wisdom. There are specific procedures to be followed in administering the sacraments, and exercising discipline. But in areas where there are no detailed requirements, lower courts are free to use their wisdom and discretion

within the bounds of biblical and constitutional principles. The assertion that a particular practice or procedure must be explicitly stated in the *BCO* in order to be allowed is contrary to the nature of the PCA's *BCO*.

4. The Supremacy of the Constitution
 - a. "The jurisdiction of these church courts is limited by the express provisions of the Constitution." (*BCO* 11-4).
 - b. The PCA does not have the "authoritative interpretation of the constitution" provision the PCUSA has. The PCA General Assembly may not make a *de facto* change in the constitution.
 - c. Judicial decisions of the Standing Judicial Commission do not have the same effect of legal precedent that would obtain in the civil courts of the USA (*BCO* 14-7).
 - d. General Assembly study committee reports do not change the constitution (*BCO* 14-7). An office bearer may be convicted of heresy for holding to theological views that are contrary to the Westminster Standards and inimical to the system of doctrine, but he may disagree with a study committee report.
 - e. Local Church Bylaws and Standing Rules and Presbytery Bylaws and Standing Rules may add to the *BCO* to include details not specified in the *BCO*. Local Church Bylaws and Presbytery Bylaws may not, however, contradict the *BCO*.
5. The parity of elders – The role of the Ruling Elder was restored to a "two-office" view (1] Elders; Teaching and Ruling, 2] Deacons). The PCA was started primarily through the efforts of Ruling Elders. For the first several General Assemblies REs outnumbered TEs, but soon thereafter TEs outnumbered REs two-to-one. There were a couple of attempts early in the life of the PCA to change to a delegated Assembly to have an equal number of TEs and REs. The TE majority consistently voted down that change. The Pastor is, by virtue of his office, the moderator of the Session and Congregational Meetings. Only Ministers may administer the sacraments. The Pastor, however, is not the sole ruler of the church. He shares governance of the church with the entire Session.
6. A dynamic tension between voluntary association and mutual submission.
 - a. The voluntary nature of the PCA is explicitly stated in *BCO* 25-9; 25-10 regarding church property and in *BCO* 25-11 regarding the process of a local church's withdrawing from the denomination. Both of these statements are consistent with the "Preliminary Principles." When a person joins a congregation he voluntarily takes a vow to submit himself to the government and discipline of the church (*BCO* 57-5.5). When a ruling elder or deacon is ordained he vows to submit himself unto his brethren in the Lord (*BCO* 24-5.5) and affirms that he believes that the form of government and discipline of the PCA conform to general principles of biblical polity (*BCO* 24-5.3). Ministers take similar vows upon ordination (*BCO* 21-5.3, 4). When a local church is constituted as a church the congregation as a whole promises to operate on the principles of the faith and order [doctrine and church governance] of the PCA (*BCO* 5-8.3). When an existing congregation transfers into a PCA presbytery, the elders of the church, as representatives of the congregation, vow to uphold the doctrine and polity of the PCA (*BCO* 13-8).

- b. Those who have taken such vows have a moral responsibility (though not a legal obligation) to abide by the decision, judgment, or order of a church court of original jurisdiction, or they may carry the matter forward until a higher court decides it (*BCO* 43 details the complaint process; *BCO* 42 details the appeals process).
 - c. By taking the vows of membership or ordination one agrees to abide by the authority of the court of original jurisdiction and higher courts as well because of the spiritual connectionalism of the Church (*BCO* 11-3, 11-4). Once the higher court has handled the matter finally, there is, because of the vows they have taken and theological beliefs they have espoused, a moral responsibility (though not a legal obligation) to abide by the final disposition of the matter as long as they are members of the PCA. A person may think that he cannot in good conscience accept the final disposition of the matter after the complaint or appellate process is complete, in which case he may leave the PCA without coercion. It should be noted that all members, sessions, Presbyteries, and the General Assembly of the PCA are morally obligated to follow the constitution of the PCA. Blind obedience, however, may not be required by any church officer or church court (*WCF* XX-2). Church courts that violate the constitution of the PCA may themselves be subject to ecclesiastical trial (*BCO* 40-6).
7. Good Faith Subscription – The issue of doctrinal subscription was addressed by the General Assembly’s adopting an amendment to the *BCO* 21-4 and the “Rules of Assembly Operation” 16-3, e., 5 (the so-called Good Faith Subscription amendments). In the PCA an office bearer need not agree with every proposition in the Westminster Standards. It is not up to the individual to determine if his differences with the Standards are major or minor. He must state each of his doctrinal differences with the Westminster Standards, and it is the role of the church court to determine the acceptability of his theological views. Note that this requirement and procedure apply to the Westminster Standards, the theology of the Church, not to the *BCO*.
8. The supremacy of theology over polity
- a. Not all of the *BCO* has full constitutional status (portions of the Directory of Worship), but all of the *Westminster Standards* are fully constitutional;
 - b. the ordination vow regarding polity is very general (*BCO* 21-5, q. 3, 24-6, q. 3) but the ordination vow regarding theology is much stronger (*BCO* 21:5, q. 2, 24-6, q.2);
 - c. there is no specified procedure for dealing with stated differences with the *BCO*, but there is a detailed procedure for dealing with stated differences with the Westminster Standards (RAO 16-3, e. 5, c.);
 - d. there is no detailed explanation of what affirming a belief in the general principles of biblical polity is, but there is a detailed explanation of the meaning of subscription to the Westminster Standards (*BCO* 21-4);
 - e. the requirements for amending the *BCO* (*BCO* 26-2) are lower than the requirements for amending the *Westminster Standards* (*BCO* 26-3), and we almost annually amend the *BCO* though we have never amended the Westminster Standards.

In any system of polity, the system works for those who work the system.

- As a representative system, the PCA system is susceptible to being manipulated by a minority that knows the system, is willing to participate in the system, capitalizes on the most influential aspects of the system, and is willing to be involved for the long term.
- After thirty-seven years of operations, in retrospect some founding fathers as well as younger men realize that in the formulation and development of our polity.
 - There are some instances in which “the pendulum effect” may have been too strong as we reacted against the excesses of our former denominational connection.
 - Our system was designed in several respects more to prevent the accumulation of influence than to accomplish mission effectively.
 - For example, the PCA is unique in that we have made funding of essential support services (Administrative Committee) a totally separate voluntary contribution request.³
 - Our system fosters competition among Committees and Agencies in fundraising and communications.
 - Our system increases the costs of operations.
 - It took years for committee coordinators and board presidents to be allowed to have communication and rudimentary attempts at coordination of efforts.
 - The law of unintended consequences in some respects has come into play.
 - We have created a system in which churches may have the rights of membership in the PCA without any of the responsibilities.
 - In an effort to insure that aggrieved parties have access to the judicial system, we have a system in which there is no method of dismissing frivolous judicial cases.
- In order for grass-roots Presbyterianism to work best, churchmen are needed – men who care about, support, and participate actively in our PCA system at all levels.
 - Pastors need to model churchmanship.
 - Pastors need to train officers to be churchmen.
 - Both REs and TEs need to participate in Presbytery and General Assembly on an ongoing basis.
 - Presbyteries need to nominate men to General Assembly Committees and Agencies.
 - Presbyteries need to send representatives to the Nominating Committee.
 - Men must be willing to serve on Presbytery and General Assembly committees and agency boards.
 - Presbyteries need to send representatives to Review of Presbytery Records Committee.
 - Commissioners need to serve on Committees of Commissioners.
 - Presbyteries need to have representatives (both RE & TE) serve on the Overtures Committee.

³ In other denominations, support services are funded by a unified budget [which the PCA will likely never have], or fees for services, which we do not have.