

# THE ROLE OF THE CONSTITUTION IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH

An Address at Columbia Theological Seminary

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## A People of the Book

There is no group of Christian people for whom constitutions are more important than for Presbyterians. In a strange way, the book review editor of the *Charlotte Observer* captured this insight when the General Assembly met in Charlotte in 1998. She had a habit of informing the community about conventions being held in the city by doing a book review of the book that was the “best seller” at each of the major conventions that came to Charlotte. The Presbyterian Church (USA) presented her with a real challenge. Can you guess which book is the “best seller” at our assemblies year after year? You got it right! It’s the *Book of Order*. For a book review editor who was used to reviewing the latest novel by John Grisham, a new book on management, or an analysis of world events, doing a review on the *Book of Order* and making it exciting for the average newspaper reader was daunting.

She did point out that of all Christian churches no group took Paul’s admonition that “all things should be done decently and in order” (I Corinthians 14:40) more seriously than did the Presbyterians. She helped her readers to understand that anywhere in the world that they might find a Presbyterian Church, they could count on it having a high regard for the scripture, having confessions of faith, and having books of order, discipline, and worship. As laudable as she felt all of this was, she couldn’t help but opine that any group whose “best seller” was the *Book of Order* must nevertheless be a pretty dull group. She was sure that any group that was so enamored with all those rules must have lost its spark of creativity and be settled into a dull sameness.

Friends, I need to tell you that whatever our reporter may have thought, focusing on the *Book of Order* is no longer a dull enterprise in the PCUSA! Conflicts over this book and how it is lived out in the life of the church have captured much of the emotional and spiritual energy of our church. We have a growing number of churches openly engaging in “ecclesiastical disobedience” to the provisions in our *Book of Order*. We have others engaging openly in a “judicial season,” seeking to enforce the provisions of this book by filing disciplinary and remedial charges against an ever increasing list of other Presbyterians and governing bodies. The major emotional energy of our presbyteries is devoted each year to conflictual debates over amendments to the *Book of Order*. And millions of dollars that ought to be spent on Christ’s mission in this nation and around the world are being spent on interest groups and media campaigns on both sides of these divisive issues. As your Stated Clerk, who by virtue of office is in the middle of all of this turmoil around the Constitution, I can’t help but ask myself from time to time if this is really what Jesus would hope for the Presbyterian Church (USA).

## Headed for a Train Wreck

As many of you know, I am not a morning person! Some of my most creative thinking often takes place after most folks are fast asleep. That happened to me a few weeks ago in Pittsburgh. I had spent a long day working on many issues related to our Constitution and had then caught a late night flight to Pittsburgh for a consultation the following day with four of our presbyteries in West Virginia and Western Pennsylvania. My mind was still racing as I was trying to go to sleep after midnight when I remembered an experience I had over 30 years ago when I was living in Texas that seemed to illustrate in a somewhat strange way the predicament we are in today in the PCUSA.

Along with several friends I was headed off for a week long adventure by train in Mexico. We had secured our \$10 tickets for the Tuesday afternoon departure of the *Aguilla Azteca* (the Aztec Eagle) from Nuevo Laredo to Mexico City. This train had a lot in common with recent restoration Amtrak has made of service from Louisville to Chicago - 275 miles in 16 hours! The *Aguilla Azteca* was to spend two nights in route covering the 500 or 600 miles to Mexico City, arriving around noon on Thursday. We arrived at the station in Nuevo Laredo around three o'clock in the afternoon on Tuesday and were pleased to find our train on the track. However, when we sought to board, the conductor refused our tickets. We were perplexed so we asked him, "Isn't this the *Aguilla Azteca*?" and he said, "yes." "Well, aren't our tickets for this train on Tuesday?" and he said "yes" again. "Well, what is the problem?" He said that while you have tickets for the *Aguilla Azteca* on Tuesday, this is yesterday's train. The whole system was running 24 hours late!

That was a precursor of a long, slow trip to come. After spending another three dollars to change our tickets for Monday's train, we headed off for Mexico City. The train would often stop in route, and we would not finally reach Mexico City until late Thursday night. One unusual and sudden stop with a squealing of the brakes took place in the desert not too far from the city of San Luis Potosi. When we got off the train as we often did at such stops, we discovered that our train had screeched to a halt about 100 feet from another train coming the opposite direction on the same track.

Neither engineer was willing to back up and pass on the second set of tracks that ran beside the track on which these two trains found themselves. At first both engineers simply blew their horns (for what seemed like an eternity) at one another hoping that the other train would back up. After that appeared not to be working, both engineers came out with a huge manual (their *Book of Order*) and proceeded to scream at each other as they sought to prove that the other was on the wrong track. When that didn't work, they both got back into their engines as the crowds on each train began to yell, "*Choque, choque!* (crash them and bash them!)." The two engineers started up their trains and headed toward one another, stopping just short of a head-on collision. With that they came out again, but this time with tools and began to fight and literally beat each other with wrenches until the crowd pulled them apart and they were taken off for medical treatment.

After a few more hours the railroad officials came out from San Luis Potosi with two new engineers, and our train was backed up and passed by on the other track, heading for Mexico City.

While this event has nothing to do with our Constitution, I couldn't help but feel that the human emotions and the counterproductive approaches the two train engineers were using to resolve their conflict have everything to do with the situation in which we find ourselves with our conflicts over the Constitution of the PCUSA. We have a "train wreck" in the making if we all continue on our present path.

- \$ We have a *Book of Order* almost as long as the manual those two engineers were using against one another and with every bit as many rules and regulations. We have transformed our *Book of Order*, which through most of our history was a very slim document of essential principles (not unlike the U.S. Constitution), into a detailed manual made for a regulatory agency model of church life.
- \$ We have a growing group of churches in open defiance of our Constitution, which ultimately cannot hold us together without a shared commitment among all of our officers and our governing bodies to be governed by our church's polity and to abide by its discipline. (G-14.0405b(5))
- \$ We have sessions and groups seeking to uphold or to change our Constitution by means never envisioned in our *Form of Government*: withholding funds, threatening to withdraw, demanding adherence to specific tenets not outlined in our Constitution.
- \$ We have movements in many of our presbyteries to circumvent the provisions of our *Form of Government* (especially chapter 14) as they work with new immigrant congregations or manage the succession of pastors.
- \$ On Maundy Thursday I received notice that a member of a church in California, living in Virginia, had filed disciplinary complaints against 14 people in a variety of presbyteries whom he felt to be in violation of G-6.0106b and pledged to file as many more as he could find.
- \$ In recent conversations with the Stated Clerk of the Synod of the Southern California and Hawaii I learned that over 100 remedial cases had been filed in Hanmi Presbytery in the last three years.

Our Constitution is not designed to handle these kinds of behaviors well, and as surely as the engineers on the two Mexican trains, we are heading toward a "train wreck" if we can't find our way to a new track as we seek to uphold the Constitution in the life of the church.

### **A Culture of Respect for the Constitution**

What is the way forward in this situation?

First and foremost, it is to develop a culture of respect in every quarter of the church for our

Constitution in its fullness: to uphold the faith of the church so clearly affirmed in the common themes of scripture and our *Book of Confessions*, to honor the covenant for our life together so clearly articulated in the first four chapters of our *Form of Government*, to abide by the provisions for our polity, worship and discipline found in our *Book of Order* and to seek to implement and/or change those provisions where they are felt to be in error in accord with the processes for such implementation and change specified in the Constitution itself.

The glue that holds us together as Presbyterians is first and foremost Jesus Christ, who is the living head of the Church (G-1.0100). This glue finds expression in the body of Christ through a common and voluntary commitment among all the church's officers to be governed by the church's polity and abide by its discipline (G-14.0405b). Without a widespread and profound commitment to these basic principles, no amount of judicial process, Constitutional amendments, or interest group politics can move us forward as a faithful church of Jesus Christ. As your Stated Clerk, I call on every Presbyterian to make a fresh commitment to be part of a culture of respect for our Constitution. To be part of this culture of respect means minimally:

- \$ to uphold Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and the essential tenets of the Reformed faith,
- \$ to abide by the provisions of our Constitution (including G-6.0106b), even if seeking to change them,
- \$ to seek correction first through pastoral approaches (Matthew 18) and conciliation and mediation (D-1.0103)<sup>1</sup>,
- \$ to honor the processes of our Constitution for seeking change or for seeking discipline or remediation

*The Standing Rules of the General Assembly* assign to the Stated Clerk the responsibility to “preserve and defend the *Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA)*.” (G.2.e.) Along with my colleagues in the Office of the General Assembly, I intend to do just that, and I invite you to join me in this enterprise. We will be diligent in making the Constitution widely available, in interpreting its meaning for the life of the church, in calling for compliance to its provisions, in serving as “clerk” to the General Assembly's Permanent Judicial Commission, in training fellow Stated Clerks and Clerks of Session in their constitutional responsibilities, and in lifting up its grand theological vision of Reformed faith and order. We will not serve as prosecutors or “enforcers” of the Constitution (functions clearly not assigned to the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly<sup>2</sup>) but will in accord with our constitutional responsibilities enable the church's judicial and legislative processes to move forward with integrity.

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<sup>1</sup>It should be noted that through using these approaches our governing bodies have been successful over the last decade in reducing the number of sessions from 494 to 301 who are not in compliance with the Constitution because they have no women elders without a single remedial or disciplinary case.

<sup>2</sup>Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church (USA), Polity Reflection 46, *The Stated Clerk as Constitutional Advisor* (2002)

The upholding of our Constitution is a shared responsibility in Presbyterian polity. Every officer is responsible to be “instructed and led” by our confessions and to be “governed by our church’s polity and . . . abide by its discipline.” (G-14.0405b) Our sessions and presbyteries have primary responsibility for our ministers and elders and the ordered life of our congregations. Amendments to our constitution are a joint venture between our General Assembly and the presbyteries. A common culture of respect for the Constitution is essential for a Reformed vision of the church to come to flower, and I call on all Presbyterians to embrace it.

### **A Missionary Polity for the 21st Century**

While a culture of respect for our Constitution (as it is) is essential for our life together, it is equally essential that we continue to shape our Constitution for the new missionary situation in which we find ourselves in 21st century America. Make no mistake about it! We are headed for a “train wreck” with our regulatory model of a *Book of Order* and need together to be about formulating a new polity for a new century. In describing our commitment to the confessions, the *Book of Order* states, “The church affirms ‘*Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda*,’ that is, ‘The church reformed, always reforming,’ according to the Word of God and the call of the Spirit.” (G-2.0200) It is time to apply this important maxim to our *Book of Order*.

Historically, the purpose of forms of government or polity has been to make possible the missionary outreach of the church in its particular culture. Polity has sought to translate core theological values into a covenant for the church’s life that empowers it for mission. That is what happened in 1788 when our church adopted its first constitution as it sought to lay out basic principles that would unite the Presbyterian Church to bring Good News to the “new world.” Today we live again in a “new world” where the historic assumptions of being an established church in a Christian culture on which our current *Book of Order is based* no longer hold. If we are to be a church that is to reach out to new immigrant groups, to Generation X, to small rural churches and suburban megachurches, and to a secular culture with no shared religious beliefs or values and in which there is no predominant racial ethnic group, we must have a new polity for our new missionary situation.

This is exactly the point that Donald Miller makes in his recent book, *Reinventing American Protestantism*.<sup>3</sup> Miller, a liberal Episcopalian and professor at the University of Southern California, set out to study why so many contemporary Americans have been attracted to a new paradigm of churches: Calvary Chapel, the Vineyard Christian Fellowship, and Hope Chapel. What he concludes is that beyond the surface differences there are two things that make these movements so contagiously attractive to their members: they have a strong and commonly shared faith and vision and they offer a rich sense of community that is most alive in highly participative worship. Beyond that, there is very little bureaucracy, structure or polity. Ministry teams are set free to be creative and to adapt new forms for new situations. As Miller sees it, this is just the kind of revolution needed in America’s mainline Protestant churches, including his own. He calls

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<sup>3</sup> Donald E. Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1997).

on our churches to recover their movement character, to be crystal clear about their shared faith and their sense of covenant community, and then - and only then - to set their people and churches free to be bearers of the Good News in a post Christian America.

This is the same kind of spirit that lay behind the efforts in 1788 when representatives of the Synod of New York and Philadelphia came together to create the first Presbyterian General Assembly and our church's first Constitution.<sup>4</sup> This was happening just as the nation was emerging from the Revolutionary War and creating its own Constitution (with no small assistance from Presbyterians). They adopted a very lean Book of Order but one with very important principles for church life and mission. The core of those principles are enshrined in our own Book of Order as "the Historic Principles of Church Order." They did not seek to solve every possible problem, to lay out all the details of how presbyteries would manage candidates, or set required structures for every governing body. However, they did affirm that the Westminster Confession and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms contained the "necessary and essential" articles for Christian faith and life, adopted a *Directory for the Worship of God* which affirmed both form and freedom in worship, and adopted *The Form of Government and Discipline* which was primarily focused on basic principles (such as "God alone is the Lord of conscience," "truth is in order to goodness," and ecclesiastical pronouncements are "ministerial and declarative") rather than on detailed manuals of operations. In short, they adopted a missionary constitution - one that was clear on basic faith and values but that also freed presbyteries and congregations to be in mission in a new nation and a new missionary situation.

Maybe more importantly, this is the kind of polity that freed the New Testament Church to "turn the world upside down" for the gospel. (Acts 17:6) The Apostle Paul developed a wonderful covenant vision for the New Testament Church as the body of Christ. To a deeply troubled and conflicted Corinthian Church Paul boldly declared that they were "the body of Christ and individually members of it." (I Corinthians 12:27). Like a body the church is made up of many diverse parts each with a different function and style of operation. For Paul diversity is a gift in the body of Christ. What holds this body together is not a common mold but a common commitment to Jesus Christ who is the living head of the church. A common obedience to Christ is the essence of the church. A common commitment to be about Christ's mission and to build the body up in love is the essence of the church's ecclesiology. A deep respect for and honoring of individual gifts and ministries is the essence of the church's style. While Presbyterians have never maintained that our polity is one of the "marks of the church," we have attempted to build our polity on the New Testament Church, and I believe it is time for us to do that again in 21st century America.

I am convinced that in many ways we are living in a situation parallel to the realities of the New Testament Church. Like the New Testament Church, the Presbyterian Church in 21st century America:

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<sup>4</sup>James H. Smylie, *A Brief History of Presbyterians* (Louisville, Geneva Press, 1996), pp. 62-65.

- \$ lives in a world of multi-ethnic and multi-cultural diversity like the community which first received the Holy Spirit at Pentecost,
- \$ is a “disestablished church” as was the church of the first century,
- \$ struggles to find unity in the midst of diversity reminiscent of the church in Corinth,
- \$ is placed in a society hungry for spiritual renewal but often searching like those that the Apostle Paul encountered at the Areopagus,

We do live in a New Testament situation and are called to be a New Testament Church in the 21st century. Like the New Testament Church, the renewal of our church to be a vital missionary presence for Christ seems all but impossible except by the power of the Holy Spirit and the risen Christ. However, as Reformed Christians we have always believed that the Holy Spirit does work in special ways through elected spiritual leaders (ministers and elders) who gather in solemn assembly to pray, study God’s word, and seek to discern God’s leading for the church. We need to be about building a new polity that opens the door for the Holy Spirit to transform our congregations and governing bodies just as it did the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15).

### **The Shape of a Constitution for a Missionary Church in the 21st Century** **Part One: A Shared Faith**

Assuming that the basis for renewal as a missionary church in the 21st century is a shared faith that gives vital expression to the truths of the Gospel, Presbyterians have an excellent foundation in our *Book of Confessions*. These confessions reach beyond the parochialism of time and culture to lift up the essential truths of the Gospel in particular times and for all time. They include the great confessions of the church ecumenical, the Apostle’s and Nicene Creeds, that express the faith of the church throughout the ages. The three Reformed confessions and three Reformed catechisms of the sixteenth and seventeenth century give expression to the watchwords of the Reformation – “grace alone, faith alone, scripture alone” - and to the Reformed distinctive with its emphasis on the sovereignty of God. The three 20th century confessions express the faith of the church in our contemporary world.

Throughout all of these confessions are common affirmations that define the shared faith of the Church, and which I believe are shared by the vast majority of Presbyterians. Chapter Two of the *Form of Government* was drafted at reunion to be an aid to our governing bodies in examining candidates concerning the essential tenets of the Reformed faith, and it does an excellent job of highlighting the major themes of our common faith as Presbyterians:

- \$ the mystery of the triune God
- \$ the incarnation of the eternal Word of God in Jesus Christ
- \$ salvation by grace alone
- \$ salvation by faith alone
- \$ the authority of scripture
- \$ the sovereignty of God
- \$ election for service as well as salvation

- \$ covenant life together in the church
- \$ faithful stewardship that shuns ostentation
- \$ seeking justice and living in obedience to the Word of God

These are the core theological convictions that unite Presbyterians. We need to affirm this confessional tradition and continually re-appropriate it for our time. The biggest problem with our *Book of Confessions* is that it is so little known and studied in the PCUSA. While the *Book of Order* may be our “best seller,” the *Book of Confessions* surely is not. Without a shared faith in Jesus Christ, no polity can renew the church. One of our first priorities for the renewal of our church as a New Testament Church in a New Century would be a reclaiming of our *Book of Confessions* as the first and most important book in our Constitution. We in the Office of the General Assembly plan to take a major initiative in encouraging all of our constituents to treat the *Book of Confessions* as truly the first book of our Constitution.

### **Part Two: A Shared Covenant for Our Life Together**

The second thing we need for Constitutional renewal is a shared covenant for our life together - an ecclesiology based on the theology of the *Book of Confessions* that is the bridge between our faith and our polity. In many ways, we already have it. For me, it is the first four chapters of our *Form of Government*. They set our whole life as a church under Jesus Christ as the living head of the Church. They give the church its mission statement in the Great Ends of the Church (G-1.0200):

- \$ the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind
- \$ the shelter, nurture and spiritual fellowship of the children of God
- \$ the maintenance of divine worship
- \$ the preservation of the truth
- \$ the promotion of social righteousness
- \$ the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world.

What a wonderful and comprehensive statement of what Christ calls us to be and to do! These chapters also summarize the great themes of the Reformed faith as I just described. They make it clear that the church is indeed a missionary society and that its life is to be defined by its mission. A wonderful statement of that vision is found in G-3.0200, “The Church of Jesus Christ is a provisional demonstration of what God intends for all of humanity.”

Finally, this section closes with a chapter on the Church and its Unity. It reminds us that the church is universal and particular, that the PCUSA is only one part of the body of Christ and always seeking the broader unity of the church, and that as part of the body of Christ we are an inclusive fellowship. It is in this very context that we find the “Principles of Presbyterian Government” that define the basics of our polity and ordering of ministry, whose goal is, interestingly enough to promote the unity that God intends for the church. In this short section (G-4.0301a-f) we have the fundamental mechanisms of our polity.



This is the covenant that is the basis for everything that follows in the *Form of Government*. In my experience, these first four chapters have a broad resonance in all quarters of the church and are a wonderful statement of the vision of church life that is the unique gift of the Presbyterian Church to the Church Ecumenical. Unfortunately, when most of our folks turn to the *Book of Order*, it is far more often to Chapter 14 as churches seek pastors, or chapter 10 as sessions seek to orient new members, or chapter 8 when there is conflict over property in the life of a presbytery. More important than all the rules in these later chapters is the vision of the church found in chapters 1-4. In fact, in an increasingly diverse and changing world, the values and principles in the first four chapters may prove far more enduring and valuable than all of the procedures for the candidacy and call of ministers found later in the book.

We need to find a way to differentiate the core values for our covenant community from the manual of operations for our governing bodies that follows. We have several overtures coming to this General Assembly seeking to “raise the bar” to 2/3’s of the presbyteries for approval of amendments to the *Book of Order*. While I do not think that is a good idea since many parts of chapters 5-18 were adopted with less than a 2/3’s vote originally and since many procedures need to change from time to time, I do think such a proposal would be of real value for the first four chapters of the *Form of Government*. We need to set our basic covenant for our church life, our foundational ecclesiology, aside from all of the rules and procedures and give them a special status as a bridge between our confessions and our polity and discipline. It is time to lift up these four chapters and their core commitments as a foundational covenant document for the Church:

- \$ that Jesus Christ is the Head of the Church and the Word of God
- \$ that the Great Ends of the Church are our common calling
- \$ that we uphold a generous orthodoxy growing out of scripture and the confessions that affirms the great themes of the Reformed faith
- \$ that we hold to an ecclesiology built on covenant community and a commitment to Christian unity.

These commitments need to be the foundation stone of our Constitution. They are our shared ethos and the shared principles that in our diversity will set us free to be a missionary church in the 21st century.

### **Part Three: A Fresh Start with our Rules and Procedures**

The one sure thing about our future as Presbyterians is that we will be more, not less, diverse as we move deeper into the 21st century. Far beyond the issues related to G-6.0106b Presbyterians are becoming increasingly diverse and our society, to which we are called to minister, is becoming even more so. The diversity among generations is increasing as we move into a new century. There will soon be no racial ethnic majority group in our country. In the church, our middle-sized congregations (the assumption on which our polity was built) are disappearing to a majority of small churches and a growing number of megachurches. In a religious “consumer”

culture people are no longer going to the local church of *their* denomination but to a church, often much further from their homes, in which they are culturally and theologically at home (guaranteeing even more diversity between our congregations). Interest groups are replacing our middle governing bodies as the primary point of connection beyond the local church. In short, we face the New Testament church's challenge of needing to be crystal clear about our faith in Christ and our core values as a covenant community and also being much more flexible about the particular procedures for the ordering of ministry and church life in our increasingly different congregations.

For most of the balance of the *Form of Government*, we need fresh thinking. What we have now is an odd mixture of cherished and deeply held Reformed convictions and a manual of operations that gives far too many specific rules for matters that can and should best be decided by a session or presbytery. For most of our history as Presbyterians we have had far smaller Constitutions than we have today. In fact, the Constitution we have today is twice as thick as those of our three predecessor churches 50 years ago and three or four times as thick as what we had 100 years ago. More rules and procedures do not make a better Constitution! In fact, it is just the opposite. Like the U.S. Constitution, such a document needs to reflect the foundational values and commitments that mold us together in a covenant community and allow flexibility to legislative bodies to shape manuals of operations that are more easily changed to fit specific situations. From a missionary perspective in 21st century America, we need a smaller, not a larger, *Book of Order*, than what we had at the turn of the century in 1900 - and we have just the reverse.

Beginning with the report of the Committee on the Nature of the Church and the Practice of Governance, which was completed soon after reunion, there have been periodic calls for a shorter and more flexible *Book of Order*, but the climate of distrust has kept all parties from reaching agreement on what all desire - a Christ centered, foundational *Book of Order* that leaves implementation decisions to our governing bodies based on solid Reformed principles. Bill Chapman subtitles his recent book on the Constitution, *Blood on Every Page*. He chose this title because every rule in the *Book of Order* was placed there by the blood, sweat and tears of some group that had a particular passion for that rule - whether it be certification standards for Christian educators, the year by year steps that a Committee on Preparation for Ministry must take with each candidate, or the mandated committees of a synod. However, when taken collectively these kind of provisions turn our Constitution into a manual of operations and almost encourage governing bodies to circumvent the Constitution when they run into a situation where these rules don't work. We need to be more flexible with our detailed rules and procedures so that we can together build a Constitution that will serve the mission of our church in the 21st century and empower the PCUSA to be a New Testament Church in a New Century.

I have no magic formula as to how we get from here to a new *Book of Order*. I certainly don't propose a rush to more Constitutional amendments. There have been several attempts to move in this direction in recent years, and none of them has proved acceptable. However, I am convinced that we must start anew a process that will lead us to a life giving and mission enabling *Book of Order* for the 21st century. One of the first steps in this direction needs to be a churchwide

discernment process that enables us together to identify those key principles of Reformed polity (and they need to be limited in number) and distinguish them from all of the rules and procedures that may be valuable but are not of Constitutional character. These principles may include things like the meaning of church membership, our understanding of the offices of ministry, the call to holy living for church officers, the presbytery as the governing body of original jurisdiction, the ordination questions and the like.

Beyond that, we need to grant much greater freedom to presbyteries and sessions to order the ministry of the church in ways that enable them to respond to the diverse and multi-faceted missionary challenges of 21st century America. We need a *Book of Order* at the beginning of the 21st century that is as small and as foundational as the one we had at the beginning of the 20th century, or better yet, the 19th. Such a polity could play an important step in promoting the peace, unity and purity of the Church and freeing us up for a fresh mission outreach to this nation and the world.

### **The Third Use of the Law**

I believe, paradoxically, that the way forward into this new future is to return to the past and reclaim a central theme from our Reformed heritage regarding the role of the law. In Book II of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* John Calvin has a wonderful section on the law.<sup>5</sup> He identifies two functions which Protestant Christians have understood for the law. The first is that the law serves to convict us of our sins and lead to Christ, who is the only true source of our salvation. The second use of the law is to provide public standards to keep reprobates and the unrighteous from moral chaos and destruction of one another.

However, Calvin's most valuable theological insight relative to the law is his concept of the "third use of the law." That third use is to offer a source of inspiration and a moral compass for the redeemed to support us in righteous and faithful living as disciples of Jesus Christ. This use of the law freed up the Genevan Christian community to proclaim and live the gospel rather than being absorbed in their sinfulness or having the law serve as a "straight jacket" to restrain them from wrong action.

This approach to the law is also evident in the *Heidelberg Catechism*. As you will remember, that catechism is divided into three parts. Part I is "Of Man's Misery." Part II is "Of Man's Redemption." Part III is "Thankfulness." It is in that third part that we find the treatment of the law and the Ten Commandments. The law is seen not primarily to convict us of our sins, or to lead us to redemption, but for the Christian as a gift from God to guide us in expressing our thankfulness to God through a moral and righteous life.

While both Calvin and the Heidelberg Catechism were concerned with the law in the Bible, this

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<sup>5</sup>John T. McNeill, editor, *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia, The Westminster Press, 1960), Book II, Chapter 7, pp. 348-366.

vision of the third use of the law has important implications for church law - and Constitutions - as well. For the last generation the first two uses of the law have been far more central in the thinking of Presbyterians than its third use. We have used our church law to regulate one another and, when that failed, to convict one another of sins. I believe that God is calling us to mold and shape a Constitution for the 21st century. It should be a Constitution based on the third use of the law. As a redeemed community, with a deep love and trust for one another in the body of Christ, we need to use our Constitution as a moral and theological compass that builds community and calls us to Christian faithfulness and missionary outreach in thankful gratitude to God.

I strongly believe that God has a vital and exciting future for the Presbyterian Church (USA) - a future in which God calls us to honor the covenant that we have in our Constitution today, and, at the same time, to build a new covenant that reflects for our generation what it means to be the body of Christ and God's missionary people in the strange, new world of 21st century America. I invite you - and all Presbyterians - into a new dialogue in the life of the church about a fresh approach to our polity for a new century that is faithful to Scripture and our Reformed tradition and, at the same time, will equip us to be "God's faithful evangelists" in a new day.