

“WHAT IN THE CHURCH IS A COUNCIL?”

Joseph D. Small

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Here I will confess, if that’s the appropriate word, I myself am a lapsed Presbyterian. It’s the diction that did it, finally, the worn-thin, shabby, church-poor words, so overused they connote to me a poverty of spirit, not the richness of it.

E.L. Doctorow, *The Waterworks*¹

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Politics and the Church’s Language (with apologies to George Orwell)

George Orwell, in his classic essay, “Politics and the English Language,” makes the telling point that language “becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts.”² Orwell was not referring to what we dismissively call “political correctness,” the bending of language to conform to ideological positions. He was talking about the way in which careless thinking leads to mistaken use of words, and the way in which inappropriate words reinforce flawed thinking.

Orwell’s observation illuminates what happened to modern presbyteries. We used to call presbyteries, along with sessions, synods, and the general assembly, “judicatories.” While sometimes understood as “courts of the church,” the term judicatory did not denote a judicial court patterned along the lines of the American legal system, but rather indicated a gathering of thoughtful people to enquire into significant matters and reach considered conclusions. Well, who knew, so the reunion of the northern and southern Presbyterian churches in 1983 devised a new generic term. Foolish thoughts produce ugly and inaccurate language; thus, the church decided to call presbyteries – as well as sessions, synods, and the general assembly – “governing bodies.” Quite apart from the gracelessness of the term, it emerged from and reinforced the warped notion that the purpose of these gatherings of presbyters was to govern the church – to direct, regulate, and manage the affairs of the institution. Thus, the change in terminology was significant: while judicatories are assemblies for the exercise of discerning judgment; “governing bodies” are managerial and legislative meetings for the regulation of institutions.

The language we chose is ugly, and it both reflected foolish thought and made it easier for foolish thought to persist and to shape behavior. True to their new label, presbyteries began to fulfill their “calling” as governing bodies, becoming legislative and regulatory. What led to the bureaucratization of presbyteries? At root, it was the bureaucratization of American society, and the church’s endemic eagerness to follow culture’s lead. But there were other symptoms and causes, many of which I identified in my essay, “The Travail of the Presbytery.”

Language and the (no longer “new”) Form of Government

Our new constitutional documents, “Foundations of Presbyterian Polity” and the “Form of Government” give us some new language – actually they recover historic language that we lost along the way. The new language is not mere window-dressing, a seasonal change in the ecclesiastical display case. Significant changes in language present presbyteries with an opportunity to regain their rightful role as principal actors in the shaping of ecclesial faith and faithfulness. New language is key because (to reverse Orwell’s observation) “appropriate language makes it easier for us to have wise thoughts.” Easier, but not automatic – the danger is that we will simply stuff old practices into new words (something a person we all admire once warned against). Presbyteries that take hold of the possibilities suggested by new language will discover again the dynamism of our originating polity.

It all begins with the ministry of the whole people of God. The opening chapters of both “Foundations of Presbyterian Polity” and the “Form of Government” embody the gospel’s testimony that *all* the people of God are called to the ministry and mission of the *whole* church. All of God’s people as ministers is more than a clever line in a congregation’s bulletin; it reverses the disturbing trend toward clericalism that has characterized recent Presbyterian life. The fact is that we have effortlessly divided the church into clergy and laity, consigning elders and deacons to the laity. The church’s real ministers are, well, *the ministers!* We imagine that only the few are “called to ministry,” while the “laity” are reduced to playing follow-the-leader. A mere glance at the New Testament is sufficient to show that ministry and mission belong to the whole people of God.

That is why we now have the language of “ordered ministries.” Within the ministry of the whole people of God, and originating from it, are ministries ordered around particular functions that are necessary in every congregation. These ordered ministries are not in a class separate from other members of the body. Rather, they are ministries formed and called by the whole body to serve the whole. Thus, counter-intuitively, the most basic of these ordered ministries is that of deacon. After all, the Greek word for “ministry” is *diakonia*.

But I want to focus on the other two ordered ministries because they are the ones that constitute the presbytery. As you know, since reunion these have been known as “ministers of the Word and Sacrament” and “elders.” This was a 1983 innovation. These two ministries had always been called by the shorthand “ministers” and “elders,” but it was understood that the constitutive, more basic terms were “teaching elder” and “ruling elder.”

The reunion innovation did two terrible things to our understanding of the church and its ordered ministries.

- First, it de-coupled the two ministries. Rather than understanding their essential collaboration in a shared ministry – both are elders, but with different yet complementary functions – it severed them.
- Second, by calling one “ministry of the Word and Sacrament” it denied the reality that both are ministries of word and sacrament, albeit in different ways. In Presbyterian polity and practice, teaching elders preach and preside. Also in Presbyterian polity and practice,

ruling elders determine the times, places, and modes of celebrating baptism and communion, they are essential participants in the celebrations, and they are responsible for shaping the development of sacramental living in the congregation and discerning its fruits. In Presbyterian polity and practice ruling elders have responsibility for ensuring attention to the word of God throughout the life of the church and discerning congregational fidelity to the word. Ruling elders' attention to the word is appropriately expressed in worship as elders serve as beadles and readers. All of this was diminished at the time of reunion.

As Foundations of Presbyterian Polity and the Form of Government make clear, the *ruling* of ruling elders does not refer to their power or their governance, but to their ruling out, measuring, discerning fidelity to the gospel in the life of the congregation. *Teaching* elders, on the other hand, bear ordered responsibility for teaching the Faith. Now, as any church educator will tell you, "teaching" does not simply refer to formal educational events. Teachers of the faith clarify the gospel in preaching, in pastoral care, in praying, in service to the community, in missional guidance, in leadership style, in celebrating the sacraments, in ecumenical engagement, and more, all in addition to regular, formal teaching. Teaching elders understand that the range of their numerous responsibilities is centered on teaching the Faith, and they understand the necessity for continual study in order to fulfill that responsibility faithfully.

Teaching elders deepen congregational understanding of the whole gospel. Ruling elders discern the "progress" of the gospel in the life of the congregation. Teaching elders call for deepened faith and faithful living. Ruling elders measure out congregational growth in faith and faithfulness.

But not only in the congregation, for teaching and ruling elders become, more formally, teaching and ruling presbyters as they gather together from many congregations in what we can now call, thankfully, a council. Back when presbyteries were governing bodies, "council" was the term many of us used for a subset of the presbytery rather than the whole. But "presbytery council" was really a euphemism for "executive committee." Now, the whole presbytery – as well as the whole session and the whole general assembly – is a council. The name indicates an assembly to consult together, discussing what we used to call "the spiritual welfare of the church." Councils are not bureaucratically organized to hear reports and vote. Councils are called to give thoughtful, sustained attention to the faith and faithfulness of the church. When you hear "council," think Nicaea, or Barmen rather than the school board or the state legislature.

I'll come back to "councils" in a bit, but before that it is worth acknowledging that the new terminology is not universally welcomed. Already there is an overture to go back to "ministers of the Word and Sacrament" and "elders." And it's worth acknowledging that the new possibilities suggested by the new language are not universally embraced. Some of us prefer the familiar comforts of presbyteries pretty much as they have been.

You may think me too harsh, but I believe that both resistances to the new terms grow from satisfaction with the clericalism of our church. Pastors who are happy with being acknowledged entrepreneurial leaders who shape the church's programmatic life and missional direction may not be eager to see themselves in essential, substantive partnership with elders whose calling it is to discern congregational faith and faithfulness. Presbyteries that are happy

with the domination of ministers over a collection of generally confused and often bored elders may not be eager to discover new patterns of genuine collegiality. Well, maybe too harsh, but maybe not.

“What’s in a name?” asks Shakespeare. “A rose by any other name would smell as sweet.” That’s a half-truth at best. How we name racial and ethnic groups makes a difference. It matters whether we refer to “The Health Care Reform Act” or “Obamacare.” And it makes a difference if we call ourselves “councils” or “governing bodies.” Unless . . . unless we intend to remain governing bodies no matter what we’re called. If we intend to perpetuate the dominance of ministers and the diminution of elders, we might as well be honest and revert to the old language.

Councils as Places of Teaching and Ruling

I have more hope and confidence, however. Many presbyteries began to imagine new ways of being long before the new Foundations of Presbyterian Polity and Form of Government were adopted. Diminished interest in and support of presbyteries confirms what we already knew: presbyteries cannot perpetuate an unsustainable organizational structure. Many presbyteries are well on the way to significant reformation. But, at whatever point you find yourselves in the presbyteries you serve, I want to suggest a tangible way of imagining what it could be like to be *a council of the church*.

Presbyteries are composed of representatives from every congregation in a given locale. But the people who gather are not just any representatives from congregations – they are teaching elders and ruling elders. They are teaching and ruling *presbyters*. When they came together in council, they do not leave behind their essential calling; they are still ordered ministers with responsibility for teaching the Faith and measuring fidelity to the gospel in the church. So, what would it look like if presbyteries were primarily places for teaching and learning, discernment and mutual accountability? How might a presbytery meeting be shaped if worship and study were at its heart rather than an occasional, poorly attended add-on?

As many of you know, presbyteries developed from two institutions in Calvin’s Geneva: the Venerable Company of Pastors and the Geneva Consistory. Together, these bodies were responsible for continuing biblical and theological study, mutual theological and ethical encouragement, examination and ordination of ministers, the church’s sacramental life, growth in discipleship, and missionary work in neighboring countries. (What you may not know is that the Company of Pastors met every Friday, from 7:00 a.m. until noon. The meeting began with Bible study . . . which was open to the public, many of whom came to overhear their pastors discuss Scripture. What you may not know is that the Consistory required every church member to memorize the Apostles’ Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, and the Ten Commandments. And if someone failed to do this, the Consistory appointed a tutor to help them, almost always a child.)

I don’t mention Calvin’s Geneva out of antiquarian interest, but only to indicate something of what presbyteries have lost and suggest that we can search for culturally appropriate ways to once again become councils with teaching and learning, discernment and discipleship at the core of who we are and what we do. I don’t want to keep this at the level of

generalities, although the generalities are important. So, I offer a just a few indications of the matters a teaching and discerning presbytery might address.

- *Teaching the faith in a secularized culture:* Sociologists argue whether “secularization” is the right word, because Americans remain a “religious people.” But religious people are not necessarily Christian people. As novelist John Updike puts it, “Religion is a curious appetite, and as with the appetite for food a great variety of substances will satisfy it, including some pretty bizarre dishes if the hunger is strong enough.”³ We live in a culture that has steadily decreasing interest in the church, and rapidly increasing confusion about the shape of Christian faith. Many people, of all ages, have simply thrown in the towel on Christian faith and practice. What do we do? Accommodate to the culture, appealing to its gnostic impulses, or discern together how to proclaim the Faith in an indifferent culture? How can the presbytery, as council, work together to understand the realities of the culture we live in – and are a part of – in order to discern the appropriate shape of Christian witness in America?
- *Teaching the faith in a fragmented church:* Fragmented at best, divided I fear. We have spent decades celebrating diversity – not just the gospel mandated diversity of gender, race, culture, and class – but theological diversity without limit. Why should we be surprised to discover that our praise of diversity in faith and morals does not lead to unity? But the fragmentation of the church is more subtle and insidious than that. We can no longer assume that all of the people sitting in the pews on Sunday morning grasp even the basics of the faith. Most preaching assumes that congregations are composed of fully catechized Christian people who need to be helped to become more faithful and committed to the church’s mission. Any public opinion poll will tell you different. How can the presbytery as council discern the shape of Christian proclamation in the church?
- *Discerning fidelity to the gospel in a technical structure:* I have listened to many more sermons than I’ve preached in the last twenty-something years. And of the sermons I’ve heard, many more have called for involvement in the life of the church than for fidelity to the gospel. When mission is talked about, it is the church’s mission programs and projects that people are asked to support. When infants are baptized, dying and rising with Christ takes a back seat to the church’s Christian education program. When discipleship is the issue, the focus is on congregational opportunities for following Jesus rather than on life in the law office, the sales floor, or the public school system. How can presbyteries become places that seek to discern the shape of the gospel in the daily vocational lives of the church’s people?

Presbyteries as councils can shape their meetings around teaching and ruling/measuring, learning and discerning. The church’s councils can become places where teaching and ruling elders study Scripture together, carry on extended explorations of central theological and ethical matters, and worship together, all as necessary to faithfully shaping the life of the church in the place and time the church inhabits.

Of course there will still be organizational and management tasks to be done. But councils will understand that these tasks are secondary. More important, councils will experience the liberating reality that organizational and managerial tasks are handled more

easily, quickly, and faithfully when they are explicitly grounded in the thoughtful, shared Faith of the church.

“Mid Councils” in a “*Bowling Alone*” World

We live in a place and time characterized by what Robert Putnam calls “bowling alone.” Institutions and organizations no longer attract involvement and command loyalty. Bowling leagues disband, service organizations like Rotary and Kiwanis shrink . . . and church nominating committees struggle to find members willing to serve the organization’s structure.

It’s not that people want to avoid relationships. In a privatized world there is a hunger for community. What we need to discover in our councils, and embed in our congregations, is the shape of community that is shaped by the gospel rather than by organizational aims and procedures. “Mid Councils” (not the most poetic of terms) are uniquely positioned to live into the promise of being centers of teaching, learning, discerning, and living, that demonstrate what the church can be.

In another of John Updike’s novels, the narrator reflects that “In general the churches . . . bore for me the same relation to God that billboards did to Coca-Cola: they promoted thirst without quenching it.”⁴ May the councils quench the church’s thirst.

¹ E.L. Doctorow, *The Waterworks* (NY: Random House, 1994) p. 34.

² George Orwell, “Politics and the English Language,” in *A Collection of Essays by George Orwell* (Garden City NY: Doubleday & Co., 1954) p. 163..

³ John Updike, *In the Beauty of the Lillies* (NY: Knopf, 1996) p. 436.

⁴ John Updike, *A Month of Sundays* NY: Knopf, 1975) p. 22.