

Why a Robust Polity and Modest Theology is a Bad Combination

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One of the corrections we in the church business sometimes feel compelled to make has to do with terminology. We remind people that “Presbyterian” is not a religion, but a denomination, or that we are evangelical in conviction even if we aren’t always evangelistic in approach. The distinctions may not mean much to people outside our circle, but for us they are critical and, in the end, they really do matter. To correct someone who speaks of “Presbyterian theology” by reminding them that our polity is Presbyterian and our theology is Reformed may likewise seem to be nitpicking, but it is a nit I think is worth picking.

Our polity is Presbyterian, that is, governance by the presbyters, the elders. We don’t have bishops, but neither may we hire and fire pastors or change the rules of church life based on the vote of a hastily called congregational meeting.

Our theology is Reformed, that is, it is rooted in that great renewal of the church that took root in Switzerland and then Scotland, the Low Countries and other parts of Europe in the 16th and 17th Centuries. We insist on Christ alone, Scripture alone, faith alone, grace alone. We read Calvin, recite Heidelberg and know the chief end of man.

I am proud to be a Presbyterian. We may not have gotten everything right, but we have a lot of things right.

At its best Presbyterianism has defined who we are by what we believe, what we do and how we do it. From the very beginning American Presbyterianism has allowed for enough tension between our theology and our polity to allow to breath as the living organism we are. We have seen our polity driven by theology – the what we do and how we do it is determined by what we believe – and our polity allowing just enough flexibility in what we believe to keep us from splintering into a thousand point of doctrine sub-groups. It has been a system defined by a glorious theology kept in check by a modest polity.

It seems, though, that we have come to a point where our theology has become modest to the point of timidity and our polity robust to the point of tyranny.

Our new Form of Government continues to emphasize the primacy of theology over polity. We declare Jesus Christ to be Head of the Church and the Scriptures to bear witness to him and to teach us his will. We hold the confessions of the church to be subordinate standards, but nevertheless to be “a reliable exposition of what the Scriptures teach us to do and believe.” We are less certain of our form of government, saying it “is established in light of Scripture but is not regarded as essential for the existence of the Christian Church nor required of all Christians.”

In practice, though, it appears that while Scripture and the confessions are still afforded great respect and affection, the power in our denominational life has made a clear and decisive shift toward our polity. The third of our three books, the Book of Order, is the power behind the throne.

At its beginning, American Presbyterianism realized the importance of polity in balancing out the sometimes unyielding demands of our Reformed theology. When Presbyterians first organized in the American Colonies they established the Westminster

Confession of Faith as their doctrinal standard in what is called the Adopting Act of 1729. But since the Confession of Faith contained language about the power of the civil magistrate to enforce compliance with sound doctrine, a provision was made for pastors and candidates for ministry who otherwise were required to subscribe to the Confession of Faith to “scruple” any provision of the confession that he was unable to adopt and receive, i.e., the civil magistrate section of the Westminster Confession. It was for the presbytery or synod to determine if a candidate’s scruple was “erroneous in essential and necessary articles of faith.”

Presbyterian history through the remainder of the 18th and 19th Centuries is anything but peaceful, but the notions of scrupling and “essential tenets” were largely forgotten as conflicts were fought and resolved through numerous splits and occasional reunions. By in large, though, the main body of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. grew and remained intact. The most serious and long-lasting split was between the northern and southern branches of the church at the time of the civil war, a split not healed by reunion until 1983.

The idea of an essential tenet re-emerged in the early 20th Century as the northern branch of the church began to respond to modernism and higher critical methods applied to the study and understanding of Scripture. From 1910 until 1927, the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. identified five essential tenets, or fundamentals, to which it believed every Presbyterian minister needed to subscribe: the inerrancy of the Bible, the virgin birth of Christ, Christ’s substitutionary atonement, Christ’s bodily resurrection and the authenticity of Christ’s miracles.

When the Presbytery of New York voted to ordain two candidates who denied the virgin birth, the Presbytery of Philadelphia filed a complaint and the dispute between the presbyteries led to a threatened walk-out from the 1925 General Assembly by the modernists from New York and their sympathizers. In true Presbyterian fashion, a committee was formed and a compromise reached and approved by the 1927 General Assembly.

While the Westminster Confession remained the official theological authority of the church to be received and adopted by all ordained officers, it was agreed that the General Assembly could not define the essential tenets of the Reformed faith and that individual ordaining bodies were to determine if any departure from the confessional standards was from something essential. While the denomination as a whole remained orthodox, at least the possibility of tolerating heterodoxy was introduced into its life. (The results of the work done through the Presbyterian Panel would suggest that about 1/3 of current Presbyterian clergy would depart in one or more significant ways from the broad essentials of the historic Reformed faith.)

By the 1970’s the rise of polity to a place of preeminence over theology was noticeable. When Pittsburgh Presbytery voided to ordain a candidate for ministry, Wynn Kenyon, who stated his opposition to the ordination of women on biblical and confession ground and his intention not to participate in the ordination of women, but to work with ordained women and to cooperate with the ordination of women elders elected by his congregation so long as we was not required to preside at the ordination, the vote was challenged and a complaint filed.

In its decision against the presbytery’s vote to ordain Kenyon the Permanent Judicial Commission of the General Assembly (GAPJC) ruled not against Kenyon’s theology but against his polity. While affirming women’s ordination as settled doctrine in the church, the commission said it was not Kenyon’s beliefs but his refusal to fulfill a polity function that made his ordination impossible: *It is not seemly to challenge the right of Mr. Kenyon to his beliefs, but*

it is the responsibility of our Church to deny ordination to one who has refused to ordain women.

Six years later the GAPJC issued a decision in another controversial case that affirmed the primacy of polity over theology. The National Capital Presbytery had voted to receive into membership a minister previously ordained by the United Church of Christ and called to serve a UCC-UPCUSA union church. In his examination by the presbytery, the Rev. M.M. Kaseman declined to affirm the deity of Christ. When his membership was approved, an appeal was filed contending that the deity of Christ was surely an essential tenet. But the GAPJC ruled that the vote was in order: *...the Constitution places the primary focus of the candidate's examination not on his or her conformity with theological prescriptions but rather on the candidate's willingness and commitment to be instructed by the Confessions of our Church and continually guided by them in leading the people of God.* ("Instructed and guided" were the operative words in the ordination vows then used by the UPCUSA).

During the same period of the 1970's and 80's the church began to deal with the question of the appropriateness of ordaining "self-avowed, practicing" homosexuals to church office. While studies and white papers on the topic of human sexuality were issued, the primary point of contention was one of polity and the authority and standards for ordination. The 1978 General Assembly issued an Authoritative Interpretation of the Form of Government, declaring that "unrepentant homosexual practice does not accord with the requirements for ordination set forth in Form of Government."

But an Authoritative Interpretation by one General Assembly could be undone by the vote of another General Assembly – and eventually would be. So, in 1996-97 the Form of Government was amended to include as G-6.0106.b: *Those who are called to office in the church are to lead a life in obedience to Scripture and in conformity to the historic confessional standards of the church. Among these standards is the requirement to live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman, or chastity in singleness. Persons refusing to repent of any self-acknowledged practice which the confessions call sin shall not be ordained and/or installed as deacons, elders, or ministers of the Word and Sacrament.*

The wording of the amendment by implication prohibited the ordination of sexually active gays and lesbians, but intentionally included all non-marital sex, in fact, all sin callously and unrepentantly practiced. The prohibition was firmly rooted in theology, though expressed in the practical and enforceable terms of polity. The fifteen year battle which ended with a new G-6.0106.b was primarily a polity battle, though the opponents of the change often argued from a theological point of view, defending the authority of Scripture and confessional orthodoxy. The proponents of change made only feeble attempts to argue from the Scriptures or the confessions, citing inclusion, diversity and welcome as guiding principles for the change in polity.

In 2008 the General Assembly voided the 1978 Authoritative Interpretation, replacing it with a new AI:

- *Interpretive statements concerning ordained service of homosexual church members by the 190th General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America and the 119th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States and all subsequent affirmations thereof, have no further force or effect.*

- *...the requirements of G-6.0108 ... apply equally to all ordination standards of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Section G-6.0108 requires examining bodies to give prayerful and careful consideration, on an individual, case-by-case basis, to any departure from an ordination standard in matters of belief or practice that a candidate may declare during examination. However, the examining body is not required to accept a departure from standards and cannot excuse a candidate's inability to perform the constitutional functions unique to his or her office (such as administration of the sacraments).* <http://oga.pcusa.org/constitutionalservices/ad-op/note22.htm>

Please note, then, that while a candidate may declare departure from (scruple) any ordination standard (including in the case of Mr. Kaseman, the divinity of Christ), he or she may not be excused from performing his or her constitutional functions. That is, Mr. Kaseman may be installed as pastor so long as he is willing to administer communion despite his denial of Christ's divinity. Mr. Kenyon may not be ordained, not because of what he believes, but because of his refusal to participate in an ordination. It fairness it should be noted that someone like Mr. Kasemen does not have the right to ordination, but does have the possibility. There is no possibility for Mr. Kenyon to be ordained. For the record, I would have been more than happy to see both Kenyon and Kaseman denied ordination.

So with a new AI in place all that prevented the possibility of gay ordination (and the ordination of anyone engaged in non-marital sexual activity) was G-6.106.b. The 2010 General Assembly approved an amendment to replace the wording with something entirely new. And as we know it was approved by a majority of the presbyteries during the 2010-2011 voting period.

The new G-6.0106b (soon to be G-2.0104.b) reads as follows: *Standards for ordained service reflect the church's desire to submit joyfully to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all aspects of life (G-1.0000). The governing body responsible for ordination and/or installation (G.14.0240; G-14.0450) shall examine each candidate's calling, gifts, preparation, and suitability for the responsibilities of office. The examination shall include, but not be limited to, a determination of the candidate's ability and commitment to fulfill all requirements as expressed in the constitutional questions for ordination and installation (W-4.4003). Governing bodies shall be guided by Scripture and the confessions in applying standards to individual candidates.*

So how do we get from "Do you trust in Jesus Christ your Savior, acknowledge him Lord of all and Head of the Church, and through him believe in one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?" (the first ordination question) to not sure about the divinity of Christ? If the examining body determines, "guided" by Scripture and the confessions, determines that the candidate's belief in a non-divine Jesus allows him or her to fulfill the requirement of trust in Christ as savior and lord of all, then there is nothing to prevent it.