

The Presbyterian Church in America

A MANUAL FOR NEW MEMBERS

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CHAPTER ONE

THE STORY OF PRESBYTERIANISM

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Presbyterianism has a glorious history and a priceless heritage. Its origins are to be found in the Church of the New Testament and its rebirth is the climax of the Reformation. Its greatness does not lie in what men have done or accomplished in their own power but in what God has seen fit to do through those who have been so surrendered to His will and have been so dedicated to the great truths of the Scriptures as to be willing to give their very lives for the faith which was more than life to them. The history of our Church has literally been written at times in the blood of its martyrs.

Presbyterianism as a system of belief and form of church government appeared as a result of the Reformation. The Reformation, which began as a sincere attempt to reform the Roman Catholic Church of the later Middle Ages and to purify it from its corruptions, brought forth the Lutheran and Reformed (Presbyterian) systems on the continent of Europe, and the Church of England. These were the three great Protestant lines which branched away from the Roman Church in the 16th Century.

Martin Luther was the first of the great leaders of the movement, and he gave to the Church which bears his name its doctrine and form of church government. Luther blazed the trail for the reform of the Church, but his popularity and influence were greatest in Germany and Scandinavia.

Although a great preacher and Bible teacher, it remained for John Calvin, systematic theologian, organizer and administrator, to captivate the other nations of Europe.

John Calvin, a prodigious writer, finished the work of reform which Luther began in 1517. Unlike Luther, the Geneva theologian had a tremendous influence in most of the countries of Europe from Poland and Hungary in the east to the British Isles in the west. Calvin (1509-1564) was born in France and received the best education which could be obtained in the Europe of that day. Like Luther, he went through a time of great spiritual distress, although we do not know as much about this period of his life as we do about Luther. We know that some time about 1532 he was suddenly converted to a living faith in Jesus Christ which completely changed his life. With his brilliant and logical mind, with his great sense of dedication to the will of God, he set himself to the systematic study of the Scriptures and set forth their teachings in a system which has come to be known as the Reformed Theology. He left France to spend most of his life after 1536 in Geneva, Switzerland, making that small city the great center of the Reformation for all of Europe.

A word should be said about the use of that term *Reformed*. It has a technical sense in which the Calvinistic system is distinguished from other evangelical systems. When we speak of ourselves as "Reformed" (a word more widely understood on the Continent than in America) we mean that we are Calvinists rather than Lutherans, Anglicans, Methodists, or what have you. There are Reformed churches (Netherlands, Germany), Huguenot churches (France), and Presbyterian churches (Scotland), but the common denominator is

"Reformed." Slowly, but surely, the Reformed theology spread to France, Poland, Hungary, Bohemia, the Netherlands, Germany, England, Scotland, Ireland, and finally to the new world of America. In Scotland the Calvinistic group became known as the Presbyterian Church. In England they were the Puritans. Elsewhere they were known as the Reformed Church.

CALVINISM IN ENGLAND

At first the Calvinists in England under Queen Elizabeth were a part of the Church of England. It had been her plan to establish a national church with an episcopal type of government which she could control, and a statement of doctrine which would please most Englishmen. This plan to make it possible for high Anglicans and the Puritans to be in one organization for the purpose of having a united England did not really satisfy any of the groups in the nation. Neither on the one hand, those who really wanted to return to the Roman Church, nor on the other hand, the Puritans, who wanted a much simpler and more biblical form of government, liked the Established Church, as it was called. Under James I (1603-1625) the Puritans gained tremendous influence in Parliament and became quite outspoken in their opposition to the absolute monarchy of James and to his religious policy for the people. Under Charles I the Puritan opposition finally became so strong that the nation arose in revolt under Oliver Cromwell, and in the civil war which followed Charles was driven from the throne. The Puritan party, often closely identified with Presbyterianism proper because of Scotland's

political ties with Parliament at this time, for a while (13 years, to be exact) gained control of the government.

THE WESTMINSTER ASSEMBLY

In 1643 Parliament called the Westminster Assembly (so named because of the place where it met) to write a confession of faith and a plan of church government for England which would join England and Scotland in the Reformed faith. As a result of the Solemn League and Covenant of this same year, Scotland was an integral part of the endeavor. This Westminster Assembly was one of the most important, if not the most important council of the entire history of the Christian Church. It was certainly the most important assembly in the history of Presbyterianism, for it produced the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms which have, ever since, remained the doctrinal foundation of Presbyterianism wherever it is found. Many believe this assembly to have been the climax of the Reformation. Its membership included many of the most learned and truly Christian leaders of the day among the English speaking peoples. As an assembly of Christian scholars it has never been equaled. It gave to the work of Calvin, especially, but the other reformers as well, a rich, marvelous expression, permanence, and influence which are truly amazing. It was frankly Presbyterian in name and in character. Presbyterianism thus became the completion of the reformation of the doctrine and government of the church according to the teachings of the Bible, for English speaking peoples.

PRESBYTERIANISM IN AMERICA

Just at this time when Presbyterianism was coming into prominence in England, the settlement of the English colonies in the New World began and Puritans and Presbyterians took a leading part in the colonization program. Everyone knows of the Puritan settlements in New England. Although these Puritans were spiritual brothers of the Presbyterians back home, the connection was more informal as they came to the New World before the Westminster Assembly sat. John Cotton, leader of the New Englanders, was invited to attend the Assembly but did not go. By 1707 the Presbyterians of the Middle Colonies were numerous enough to form the first presbytery in America. Within a few years and under the efforts of Francis Makemie and other Presbyterians, the movement spread from New York and Pennsylvania into Virginia and the Carolinas. As a result, in 1789, the first General Assembly was held. The original growth of Presbyterianism in the Middle Colonies was largely due to the huge emigration of Scots and Scottish-Irish (Scots who had fled to Ireland in times of persecution). For instance, over 30,000 Presbyterians arrived from Ireland alone in the two years 1771-1773. And at the time of the Revolutionary war it was reliably estimated that two million of the three million persons in the colonies were Calvinists (Reformed) of some sort. As Presbyterianism spread southward and then westward over the mountains, it remained true to its heritage. As early as 1729, by the Adopting Act, the church proclaimed its loyalty to the Westminster Confession and to the Catechisms declaring them to be its standard of doctrine and government.

THE SOUTHERN CHURCH

In 1861 the Presbyterians of the south formed their own church and separated from those in the north. It has often been asserted that slavery caused the split in Presbyterianism. The famous Gardiner Spring Resolution offered to the General Assembly of 1861 was the occasion for the division. Northern leaders managed to pass a resolution committing the Presbyterian church officially to the support of the federal government in regard to secession. However, this "straw" which finally broke the back of the church was only the culmination of a long history of tension. The issues lay much deeper than politics. Presbyterianism in the north had long been invaded by heresies. Liberal theology had already virtually taken over New England-today the center of both Universalism and Christian Science. Many ministers in the north had departed from the standards of the church contained in the Westminster Confession of Faith. In 1837 this had already led to one split in the church between the "New School" and the "Old School" Parties. The Presbyterians of the south were overwhelmingly in favor of the "Old School" viewpoint and they also took a strong stand against political activity on the part of the church. They felt that such activity was contrary to the Gospel and to the historic position of Presbyterianism. In 1861 the first General Assembly of the Southern Presbyterian Church met in Augusta, Georgia, in the First Presbyterian Church building (which is still standing), reaffirming their loyalty to historic Presbyterianism and to the Confederacy. After the war, the Presbyterian Church, U.S. was in a strong position doctrinally to proclaim the Gospel, even though its members had suffered along with the south in the

war and the Reconstruction era. Throughout most of its history, the Presbyterian Church U.S. remained true to the Reformation, to the Westminster Standards and to the Word of God upon which it is founded. In more recent years there have been significant departures in both faith and order to tarnish the testimony of a once-faithful church. In 1974, mounting tensions led to the separation of over 250 congregations to form the nucleus of a new Presbyterian Church in America. Today the Presbyterian Church in America is the largest conservative Presbyterian body in the U.S., with some 130,000 members as of 1984 and churches in most of the 50 states. Associated with the PCA in another level of relationship through the *North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council* (NAPARC) are the *Orthodox Presbyterian Church*, the *Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America*, the *Christian Reformed Church*, the *Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church*, and the *Korean Presbyterian Church*.

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CHAPTER TWO

WHAT PRESBYTERIANS BELIEVE

Rev. G. Aiken Taylor, Ph.D.

It is frequently pointed out that the word “Presbyterian” refers to the Eldership and that Presbyterianism, as such, is a form of church government. But Presbyterianism is not only a form of government in the Church. It is also a well-defined system of beliefs or of doctrine. In the exaltation and interpretation of the Bible, the Reformation reached its zenith in the teachings and writings of John Calvin. Thus Presbyterianism, following his interpretation of the Bible, is known as Calvinism. More specifically, the Calvinism of Presbyterians is based on the *Westminster Confession of Faith* and the *Larger and Shorter Catechisms*, documents which were written nearly a hundred years after Calvin died. Presbyterians share with other evangelical churches many basic beliefs. Presbyterians also recognize that earnest Christians may follow other interpretations of the Bible in non-essential matters. But Presbyterians believe that in the Reformed system (another word for Calvinism) the teachings of the Bible are most fully and most accurately set forth.

Every Presbyterian officer and minister takes a vow that he believes the Reformed faith to be that system of doctrine which the Bible teaches. Every Presbyterian officer and minister in the more conservative Presbyterian churches, moreover, also vows that he will take steps to remove himself from his position should he ever find that his beliefs have

taken another direction. Now the strength of Presbyterianism lies in its central loyalty to the Scriptures. These churches have always insisted that only in the Bible may we find what we must believe about God, His works and His ways. Only the Bible is a rule of faith and life free from error--*our infallible rule of faith and practice*. We believe that Presbyterianism agrees with what the Scriptures teach and that it contains nothing contrary to what the Scriptures teach.

SOVEREIGNTY

As a system of doctrine, all Presbyterian beliefs are determined by a basic thought about God: that He is sovereign in all things. The doctrine of the sovereignty of God teaches that God governs His creation, His creatures and all their actions. If loyalty to the Bible is the great strength of Presbyterianism, its belief in the sovereignty of God is its very life. By this doctrine, Presbyterians mean to say that who God is provides the key to human experience, not what man does. And what God works provides the key to salvation, not what man works. When we think of faith, we think first of God. When we think of the effects of faith we think first of God. Even when we think of the ordinary events in the lives of every man we think first of God. Presbyterians believe that everything which happens takes place according to the will of God and can be fully understood only in the will of God. Nothing can come to any man that He does not allow for His own purposes and glory. He overrules the actions of evil men and brings their evil to naught. He works all things after the counsel of His own will and turns all things, even apparent evil, to ultimate good in the lives of those who love Him, who

are the called according to His purpose. Man's reason for living is to glorify God by doing His will and to enjoy Him forever in the practice of life's highest privilege which is to serve the sovereign God who created him and gives him breath.

TOTAL DEPRAVITY

Presbyterians believe that as the result of Adam's sin all men are sinners; that sin is a stain upon us from our birth so that if left to the natural inclinations of our wills our lives would inevitably turn to evil. In the view of Presbyterians human nature is not neutral: it is not free to move upward or downward depending on circumstance, environment or education. Neither is human nature good--capable of infinite development in goodness, needing only to be left alone or "brought out" to achieve perfection. Human nature is rather sinful and "inclined to evil as the sparks fly upward." We see undesirable behavior and sinful tendencies in the smallest infant and we observe that without discipline and restraint human beings inevitably live selfishly. This view of human nature Presbyterians describe by the term "original sin" because human imperfection seems to be both innate and instinctive. This imperfection (sin) taints every facet of our personalities. Consequently the description of original sin to which Presbyterians subscribe is summarized in the doctrine of "Total Depravity." Mankind, we say, is inevitably (originally) and altogether (totally) marked by sin on account of the Fall. The doctrine of "Total Depravity" also suggests man's helplessness. Human beings are not only sinful, they are also helplessly sinful. We are spiritually dead in our sins,

bound under the guilt and penalty of sin and unable to do anything to please God. None of our works are pure and therefore pleasing to God. All our righteousness is as filthy rags. We do not even have it in us to turn to Him that we may be cleansed and healed.

SALVATION

Presbyterians believe that God so loved us—while we were dead in trespasses and sins—that He sent forth His only begotten Son to redeem us. The Lord Jesus Christ, pre-existent with the Father, by Whom He created the worlds, came to earth by being born of the virgin Mary. He, the Eternal Son, took upon Himself our nature, lived a sinless life as a man and died on the cross in a sacrifice which somehow paid the price of our redemption from sin—we know not how but we believe it. In a victory over death and the grave our Lord rose from the dead and returned to the Father from Whom He sent the Holy Spirit to apply to those who would believe the effects of His work. In the gift of the Holy Spirit—by grace through faith—the originally sinful nature of man is transfigured to become godly and possessed of the capacity to be God-like. This "new life" begins now in the hearts of those who have been justified by grace through faith and received the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ. It continues into and through eternity.

ELECTION

In keeping with the doctrine of sovereignty, under which God is seen to determine all things, Presbyterians believe that the knowledge of Christ and the acceptance of Christ which belong to salvation also come from God. We are saved by

faith alone and this faith itself is a gift of God. Our personal redemption is not due to any goodness of our own for we have none; neither is it earned by our good works, for sinners cannot accumulate "credit" leading to redemption. We find Christ because He finds us. We love Him because He first loved us. We become His because He chooses us, calling us and sanctifying us after He justifies us. Presbyterians do not pretend to understand the great truth underlying the election of God. They simply know that they did not seek God until He enlightened their hearts; they did not believe until He gave them faith; they did not come until they felt themselves moved. The mysteries of His will we cannot fathom, but we know that had it not been for Him we would not be where we are. Because salvation is clearly not given to every man (although we know not why) Presbyterians therefore believe in reprobation, or the eternally lost condition of those not elect. The doctrine of election is dear to Presbyterians because, on the one hand, it pays homage to the sovereignty of God in all human affairs and, on the other, because it gives a certainty and an assurance to those whose trust in the Lord Jesus Christ that no dependence on themselves can give. The effect of such a faith is the assurance that all things work together for good to them who "...are the called according to His purpose," that nothing in this life or in the life to come can separate them from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus. This assurance means, to the believer, that he can go forward boldly into whatever path he feels led because he knows that it is God who goes before. It further means that he is eternally secure in the love of God because he has been sealed-not of himself-by the Holy Spirit until the final day of fulfillment.

SANCTIFICATION

Presbyterians believe that as the election of God calls men to redemption in Jesus Christ so it calls them to newness of life in Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit not only makes a child of sin to become a child of God, He also leads the new believer into anew way of life which is in conformity to the will of God; into holiness of life in sanctification. We believe that every Christian will show forth in his life the fruits of a living faith; that he will grow in spiritual maturity and in patterns of living which will increasingly conform to the will of God for him. We believe that love, joy, peace and all the other characteristics of godliness will necessarily become evident in this life as the Holy Spirit increasingly takes charge; that he will more and more "live unto righteousness" as he moves towards the "measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ." As love of God increases within him, love for his Christian brothers and for his human neighbors everywhere will correspondingly increase. To this end, Presbyterians believe in the necessity for utilizing the "means of grace," prayer, worship and, most especially, the study of God's Word.

THE CHURCH

Presbyterians believe in the holy, catholic Church; that is, in the universal unity of Christ's body in time and eternity. As a vine and its branches comprise a single whole, so Christ and all those in whatever place or age derive their life from Him comprise a single body, the Church universal. This Church is not to be identified with any denomination or body on earth for it exists wherever a true child of God may be found. We believe that there are Presbyterians who belong to this Church

and there are Presbyterians who do not; there are Baptist, Methodists and Roman Catholics who belong to this Church and there are Baptists, Methodists and Roman Catholics who do not. Because Presbyterians believe in the holy, catholic Church, they also believe in the Communion of Saints: the corporate practices of the Christian life. Christian living is not a solitary thing. We believe it to be the Lord's will that Christians congregate in churches for worship, for service, for growth in grace and mutual edification. The Church universal is related in those corporate manifestations of Christ's body in which the ministry of the Word, the administration of the sacraments, the exercise of government and discipline according to the New Testament pattern establish and enlarge the household of faith.

THE SACRAMENTS

Presbyterians believe in two sacraments, baptism and the Lord's Supper. We believe that they are genuine sacraments, that is instituted by Christ Himself; visible signs which actually confer the blessing or grace of God when appropriated in faith. We do not believe that the blessing is inherently present in the sacraments, but that they are rather the signs and seals of the blessings they represent. As the Holy Spirit does not dwell in the pages of a Book, and yet He warms our hearts by means of the message of that Book, so grace does not reside intrinsically in the sacraments, but comes to the believer who receives them in faith. Baptism is a sacrament which signifies and seals God's covenant promise to be a Father to His own and to their children. It visibly represents the way this promise is carried out in the coming of

the Holy Spirit upon the life of those in whom the promise is fulfilled. It is a sacrament which belongs to any in whom there is reason to assume that the promise is being fulfilled, that is, on any professing their faith or setting up a household of faith. We believe that baptism belongs to the children of believers when a household of faith is setup and the conditions of prayer and worship are met. These bring evidence of the Holy Spirit's presence in the hearts of the children as well as in the hearts of their believing parents. Because we have visible as well as historical evidence that in a Christian home children may grow in the true nurture and admonition of the Lord, we believe that the covenant sign and seal of the Lord's presence (baptism) belongs to such children. The Lord's Supper not only shows forth the Lord's death until He shall return, but is a sacrament in which He is truly though spiritually present and truly though spiritually received. Again, as the Word conveys grace by providing the occasion for the Holy Spirit to speak to the human heart, so the Lord's Supper conveys the benefits of the death and resurrection of Christ to believers who approach the Table in faith. Presbyterians believe that the Supper is not the possession of any person, congregation or church. It is the Lord's Supper. It is not the table of any sector denomination. It is the Lord's table. We do not minister about the table as hosts, but as guests of Him who issues the invitation to come and who distributes His benefits severally as He will. Consequently we do not believe that we can dispense or withhold the gift of grace; that we can bar any believing Christian whom He would feed. For such reasons we practice "open" communion. At the same time we expect those who

partake to be members in good standing in an evangelical church.

THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE EVERLASTING

Presbyterians believe in the return of Jesus Christ "to judge men and angels at the end of the world." Until He comes, we believe that the souls of those who die in Him depart to be with Him "where they behold the face of God in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies." At the last day, we believe that the dead shall be resurrected and the living shall be changed. Christ's elect "unto honor...and everlasting life," but the reprobates "unto dishonor... and punishment with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power."

Dr. Taylor, editor of the Presbyterian Journal from 1959 until 1983, served as president of Biblical Theological Seminary in Hatfield, Pa., until his death early in 1984.

CHAPTER THREE

PRESBYTERIAN GOVERNMENT

Rev. E. C. Scott, D.D.

The Presbyterian church derives its name from the Greek word, presbyters, which is translated "elder." So a Presbyterian church is one that is governed by elders. Strictly speaking, the Presbyterian church is not a "democracy." A democracy, as the term is understood in political science, is a form of government in which a body governs itself, with every member exercising an equal voice in decisions affecting the life of the whole body. The order can be seen in the congregational form of government, such as in Baptist and Congregational churches. These vest the authority of the church in the congregation itself and decisions of every kind—including the reception of members—are made by the congregation as a whole. Nor is the Presbyterian church a "monarchy." The monarchical form of government is represented by those churches following the episcopal order, that of government by bishops. In the Episcopal, the Methodist and the various Catholic communions, a single person—the bishop or his authorized representative—holds in his hands the spiritual government of the church. He alone can perform important functions and the minister, as his ordinary representative, alone receives members into the church. In the Roman communion, the bishop, or an authorized priest, may form a "corporation of a single whole" alone to hold the properties belonging to the church. The Presbyterian church

follows neither the "democratic" nor the "monarchical," form of government. This form we believe accords with the New Testament pattern. In our system, elders are elected by the congregation for the purpose of governing. Once ordained and installed, they assume full spiritual authority. This order, upon which the government of the U.S. is based, expresses the view that certain spiritual "specialists," by virtue of experience, spiritual maturity and godly piety, are better qualified to interpret the Word of God and discern the will of the Lord for the congregation than the congregation as a whole or any single person, cleric or lay.

IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

In the New Testament, which gives us the history of the early Christian church, we find two classes of elders-teaching elders and ruling elders. These two classes of elders are today found in Presbyterian churches. They are equal in authority and differ only in the duties assigned to them by the Constitution. The teaching elder (or minister) is ordained to preach the Gospel and administer the sacraments. Also, he is moderator of the session and shares with the ruling elders authority to administer the spiritual government of the church. Those who fill the office of elder must meet rigid spiritual requirements. These requirements are set forth clearly in the New Testament (1 Tim.3) and the Book of Church Order, the governmental standard of the church. The teaching elder (or minister of the Word) *should possess a competency of human learning, and be blameless in life, sound in the faith, and apt to teach....* Those who fill the office of ruling elder should also *be blameless in life and sound in the faith; they should be men*

of wisdom and discretion; and by the holiness of their walk and conversation should be examples to the flock. Teaching elders are ordained by the presbytery after they, as candidates under the care of presbytery, have followed a prescribed course of study in college and theological seminary. A presbytery may ordain a candidate only when he has received a call to a definite work. Usually the call is from a congregation to become its pastor, although a candidate may be ordained as teacher or evangelist. Ruling elders are elected by each congregation at a meeting regularly called for that purpose. The session itself ordains and installs new ruling elders when all requirements for instruction and examination have been met. Because of the high spiritual qualifications which ruling elders must possess, congregations should exercise the greatest care in their election. Much study should be given to the male members so that only those who can meet the requirements are nominated and elected. Some congregations elect a nominating committee, while others use the plan of having all the members participate in the nomination, perhaps by checking names on a prepared list.

THE SESSION

A local session consists of the pastor or pastors (if there are more than one) and the ruling elders. It is responsible for maintaining the spiritual government of the congregation. In doing this the session has the authority "to inquire into the knowledge, principles, and Christian conduct of the church members under its care." The session has supervision over all organizations of the church: the board of deacons, the Sunday school, the men's organization, the women of the church and

the young people. No individual member of the session-pastor or ruling elder-is by himself the session. Members, therefore, may speak in its name only if authorized to do so. There are three possible other "courts" above the session (although some Presbyterian churches have only two): presbytery, synod and general assembly. The Presbyterian Church in America does not have synods. Some smaller Presbyterian bodies do not have general assemblies but call their top courts, the synod. Most Presbyterian churches are represented in presbytery by all the ministers and one ruling elder from each church within a certain district, except the larger churches are generally allowed more than one ruling elder—perhaps in the ratio of an additional elder for each 500 members, or for each 1,000 members. The ruling elder representatives to meetings of the presbytery and synod are elected by the session and not by the congregation. While ruling elders are members of the congregation, ministers are not. Ministers are members of the presbytery. In Presbyterian churches which have synods and also a general assembly, ministers may also be members of synod, unless by special action the synod has decided to make its membership "delegated." The top courts of Presbyterian churches are generally "delegated," meaning, made up of commissioners elected by the presbyteries. One notable exception at this time is the Presbyterian Church in America whose General Assembly consists of all the ministers and elders from every church in proportion to size. In the Presbyterian Church U.S., commissioners are elected by the presbyteries in proportion to size, one minister and one ruling elder for each 5,000 communicant members counting all the churches in the presbytery. Presbyteries have the power to

receive and issue appeals, complaints and references brought before them in an orderly manner. Presbyteries also have the power to review the records of sessions and to require them to observe the constitution of the church. The presbytery ordains ministers, installs them as pastors and dissolves the pastoral relationship under appropriate circumstances. Presbytery also has the power to organize and dissolve churches and to oversee the churches within its jurisdiction. The size of presbyteries may vary from a few counties in the larger Presbyterian bodies to several states in the smaller churches. The synod has power to receive and issue all appeals, complaints and references sent from the presbyteries; to review the records of presbyteries and require them to correct anything they may have done contrary to order. The synod must take care that all proper injunctions of higher courts are carried out by the presbyteries. In those denominations having synods below a general assembly, the chief function of such a regional body, which may cover several states, is in the administration of colleges and similar institutions; and in regional activities and programs. In the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America and the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church, the synod is the top court of the church, functioning as the general assembly functions in the other Presbyterian churches. Thus both the RPCNA and the ARP have General Synods which meet once a year to decide matters affecting the denomination as a whole.

THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY

The highest court in the Presbyterian Church U.S.A., the Presbyterian Church in America, and the Orthodox

Presbyterian Church is called the General Assembly. Except for the Presbyterian Church in America, whose General Assembly consists of representatives from all of the churches in the whole denomination, the General Assembly is a delegated body, made up of commissioners (the proper name for voting delegates) elected by the presbyteries. In every church an effort is made to have as nearly the same number of minister commissioners as ruling elder commissioners comprising the General Assembly. The General Assembly meets once a year. It has the power to receive and issue all appeals, complaints and references regularly brought before it from the lower courts. The records of the lower courts are reviewed and necessary steps are taken to require those courts to correct anything they may have done contrary to order. The General Assembly adopts a budget for all its approved benevolences and authorizes expenditures by its committees, boards or agencies. In most Presbyterian bodies, the budget adopted by the General Assembly is apportioned among the presbyteries in such a way as to encourage equitable giving from the local churches. The General Assembly also has the power to initiate changes in the constitution of the church, although no Presbyterian church permits its top court to make such changes unilaterally. The process instead is much like the process by which the Constitution of the United States is changed: The top legislative body proposes the change, which then must be approved by a designated proportion of lower, or regional, units. In most Presbyterian churches, changes in the Confession of Faith must be approved by at least two-thirds of the presbyteries after they have been voted by a General Assembly (or General Synod); then ratified by a second

General Assembly (or General Synod). Changes in the form of government contained in the Book of Church Order are permitted by most Presbyterian bodies after a majority of the presbyteries have approved and the change has been ratified in the next succeeding meeting of the church's top court. Consequently, the lower courts of the churches are very much involved in any changes or alterations in the constitution. The General Assembly, finally, has the power to accomplish church union with other Presbyterian bodies of like faith and order. Generally, this is done through the adoption of a plan of union drawn up by committees representing the bodies that propose to unite. The voting process is similar to that by which changes in the Constitution are approved. The various courts of a Presbyterian church are not independent of each other but are related to each other in that every act of one court "is the act of the whole church performed by it though the appropriate organ." Thus, in matters affecting the presbytery, the actions taken by that court are actions of the entire church. And in actions taken by the session, it is the Presbyterian church acting. All courts "are one in nature...differing only as the constitution may provide."

THE CONSTITUTION

The constitution of any Presbyterian church consists of two parts: 1) A manual of doctrine generally designated by the name, Confession of Faith; and 2) A manual of government generally designated by the name, *Book of Church Order*, or *Book of Order*. Churches maintaining the tradition of historic Presbyterianism hold to the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms as their doctrinal

standards. The Presbyterian Church U.S.A. has adopted, with varying degrees of authority, additional statements of faith as contemporary supplements. The Presbyterian Church U.S.A. accepts a number of confessional statements in addition to the Westminster Confession of Faith, chief among which is a document known as the Confession of 1967. The Presbyterian Church U.S., before its merger with the United Presbyterian Church U.S.A. to form the Presbyterian Church U.S.A., had refused in 1977 to replace the Westminster Confession with the more contemporary "Declaration of Faith," although it commended that document for study to the churches—and many of them referred to it and quoted it in their own life and practice. That refusal, however, has now been rendered moot because of the subsequent merger of the two churches in 1983. The Presbyterian Church in America and the other Presbyterian churches in the North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council, retained the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms as their doctrinal standards-- believing that church order and unity are enhanced when a church puts into clear language its understanding of what the Scriptures teach. This practice (of summarizing the teachings of Scripture in statements of belief for the unity of the church) is what makes a church a confessional church. Briefer confessions, such as the Apostles' Creed, declare the fundamentals of the Christian faith. Larger confessions, such as the Westminster Confession, elaborate upon the entire system of doctrine according to Scripture. The *Book of Church Order* in a Presbyterian church consists of several parts. First, there is a *Form of Government*, specifying the organization of the church, the function of its various parts and the rules by

which it operates. Next, there are *Rules of Discipline* by which problems are met and solved, errors are corrected and erring members and officers dealt with. Under the *Rules of Discipline*, members and officers may even be tried by the courts of the church for offenses committed. However, punishment is limited to admonition, rebuke, suspension and (the most severe) excommunication or separation from the fellowship of the church. Finally, a *Book of Church Order* contains a *Directory of Worship*, including rules for the conduct of public worship, for [he administration of the sacraments and for such occasions as marriages, funerals and dedications.

SUBSCRIPTION

All Presbyterian churches require prospective officers—minister and elder to subscribe to the faith and order of the church. This means that every teaching elder, every ruling elder and every deacon is expected to declare that he accepts the Confession of Faith as a statement of what Scripture teaches and what he believes; and the Book of Church Order as the system of government under which he is willing to serve. This affirmation is required before an officer may be ordained. The subscription act is not required of church members, only of the officers. Presbyterians believe that the only requirement for membership in the Church of Jesus Christ, which is His body, is a sincere profession of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ as Savior and a promise to serve Him in His church. Thus Christians who have questions about details of Presbyterian doctrine may be fully accredited as members of the church. To belong to Christ is to qualify as a member of

His church. However, Presbyterians also believe it is fair to expect the leaders of the church to be knowledgeable Presbyterians as well as professing Christians. In Presbyterian churches the minister occupies a position of prominence because he has undergone many years of study and preparation for the office he holds. On the other hand, the ruling elder devotes a short time in preparation for his office. Yet there is no difference between the minister and ruling elder as they sit together in all church courts. Each has a vote and equal privileges in debating questions. The minister who has been called by a congregation to become its pastor accepts the responsibility of spiritual leader. He should keep the session informed of important matters to be decided by this court, and the ruling elders who accepted responsibility for supervising the spiritual government of the congregation must share with the pastor the endeavor to find the solution to every problem. When a decision is reached it should be that of the entire session and not simply of the pastor or of a few leading elders. The pastor, with the ruling elders, must keep in close touch with the members in order to know their spiritual needs. In his relationship to presbytery the minister has continuous membership while the ruling elder membership changes from meeting to meeting. This gives an advantage to the minister and with it greater responsibility. Also, since ministers give full time to the work of the church they are called upon for a wider service in presbytery. Every minister is called upon for a considerable amount of work on various committees of presbytery. The faithful rendition of this service makes possible the effective functioning of presbytery. Naturally,

ruling elders are called upon to share in important committee work.

Dr. Scott was for many years the efficient and beloved stated clerk of the PCUS. His original treatment of the subject of Presbyterian government has been revised and brought up to date since his death in 1972.

CHAPTER FOUR

JOINING THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Rev. B. Hoyt Evans

In his book, *The Creed of Presbyterianism*, Dr. Egbert W. Smith writes of the Presbyterian church: *Her door of entrance is as wide as the gates of heaven*. In a large sense, this statement is very true. The requirements for membership in the Presbyterian church are basic and biblical. Actually, people may become members of the Presbyterian church in three different ways.

1. **They may be received by the session (the elders) of a particular Presbyterian church on the basis of their transfer by letter from another evangelical church.** (An evangelical church is one which requires a profession of faith in the historic Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ for membership.) Members who are received from other churches are not baptized and are not required to make another public profession of faith.
2. **They may unite with a Presbyterian church by making a restatement or reaffirmation of their faith before the session.** Sometimes for reasons of time or circumstance, it is impossible for a person to secure a certificate of membership in order that he may move his membership to a Presbyterian church. Some evangelical churches will not grant certificates of transfer allowing their members to unite with churches of other denominations. In such situations, the person who desires to join the Presbyterian church is asked to reaffirm his faith before the session by answering the same questions asked of those who unite with the church on profession of faith. Such persons, however, are not rebaptized or required to make another public profession of faith.
3. **A new Christian, or a child of the Covenant, unites with a Presbyterian church by making a profession of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.** Those who become members of the church in this way appear before the session and answer satisfactorily five fundamental questions prescribed by the Book of Church Order.

If they give evidence of sincerity and earnestness in their faith in Christ, the session votes to admit them to the ordinances of the church and to church membership. They ordinarily then appear before the congregation to repeat their public profession of faith in Christ, usually by answering again the five questions from the Book of Church Order. At that time they also receive Christian baptism, if they have not already been baptized in infancy.

In whichever of these three ways a person becomes a member of a Presbyterian church, it is assumed that he understands and gives agreement to the five questions in the Book of Church Order. These are the basic vows of church membership, describing what Presbyterians believe to be necessary in order for a person to be a Christian. The questions do not constitute an examination of intelligence or learning; they are a description of Christian experience as the Presbyterian church understands it.

SIN AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

The **first question** asked of those who seek to become members of a Presbyterian church is: *Do you acknowledge yourself to be a sinner in the sight of God, justly deserving His displeasure, and without hope save in His sovereign mercy?* This question points to the fact of sin and what sin does in the lives of people. For a person to become a member of the church, he should know what sin is, that he himself is a sinner, and that sin leads to spiritual death. No one who thinks himself "good" is approaching religious experience prepared to understand or accept Jesus Christ as Savior in the full, Christian sense. What is sin? It is "self" going against the will and the way of God. God made known His will and His way in His Commandments. When we violate the laws of God we are guilty of sin. "Whosoever committed sin transgresses also the law: for sin is the transgression of the law" (1 John 3:4).

There are two ways of breaking the law: (1) by failing to do what the law requires, and (2) by doing what the law forbids. A man who fails to pay his taxes breaks the law by failing to do what it requires. A man who drives fifty miles an hour in a thirty mile speed zone breaks the law by doing what it forbids. Men violate God's law in the same ways. Paul wrote, "For the good that I would, I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do" (Rom.7:19). Whosoever else may be harmed by it, sin is basically an offense against God. When David had committed a grievous evil against Uriah and his wife, Bathsheba, he prayed to God, "Against Thee, Thee only have I sinned, and done this evil in Thy sight" (Psalm 51:4). Sin is so offensive to God that He cannot look on it: "Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look on iniquity" (Hab. 1:1). Who does sin affect? It touches and damages the life of every person. All who ever lived have sinned except One, and that is Christ Himself. The Bible states very clearly that all are sinners and that all have sinned. "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8. See also Eccl. 7:20 and Rom. 3:23). Not only does the Bible tell us we are sinners, but when we are honest with ourselves, our consciences tell us the same thing. Where does sin lead? It always leads to death. Death came to our first parents, because of their sin. All of their descendants have been sinners and have deserved death because of their sins. "Wherefore as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned..."(Rom. 5:12. See also Rom. 6:23 and Ezek. 18:4). Spiritual death means being separated from God forever (Isa. 59:2). In our own strength there is nothing we can do to overcome the evil

effects of sin in our lives. We know what we ought to do, but we find ourselves unable to do it. Paul said, "For I know that in me (that is in my flesh) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not" (Rom. 7:18). If there is any help for us as sinners, it must come from someone else. Other people cannot help, because they are sinners too. Our help comes only from the Lord. There is nothing we can do about sin, but He has already done all that is necessary. We deserve death, but God takes away our sin and gives us eternal life in its place. "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord"(Rom. 6:23).

WHO JESUS IS AND WHAT HE DOES

The **second question** asked of those who would join a Presbyterian church is: *Do you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as the Son of God and Savior of sinners, and do you receive and rest upon Him alone for your salvation as He is offered in the Gospel?* In order for a person to say "yes" to this question, he must know Who Jesus is and what He does. When the Bible refers to Jesus as the Son of God, it clearly means that He is equal with God, that He IS God. He said, "I and my Father are one" (John 10:30). Again He said, "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father" (John 14:9). The Bible ascribes to the Lord Jesus qualities, honors, and works which can belong to God alone. The clear estimate of the Scriptures is that Jesus Christ is God. The Lord Jesus is also human. The Bible represents Him as a human being who was born of a woman, who lived a truly human life, and who died a real death. The Scriptures leave no doubt as to the reality of His humanity. As to His nature, our Lord is both God and Man.

Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners. (See Luke 19:10 and Mark 10:45). He could save others because He had no sin of His own for which to answer. (See Peter 2:22.) He died in the place of sinners to answer for their sins (Rom. 5:6,8). He, the Son of God, took the punishment of those who were guilty in order that the guilty might share the reward of the innocent (2 Cor. 5:21). The Lord Jesus died our death that we might live His life. When we say that Jesus Christ saves people, we mean that He delivers them from the death and punishment they were to receive because of their sin. Instead of death and punishment, He gives them life and joy. There is a great difference between being saved and being lost (see John 3:36). Those who are saved by Christ have the hope of the resurrection and the hope of heaven (see 1 Thess. 4:16-17 and John 14:2,3). Those who have not found Him have not this hope. The Lord Jesus saves those who put their faith in Him. The Bible says, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved" (Acts 16:31). What does it mean by "believe?" When meal time comes around, a healthy boy will know that he is hungry. He also knows that his mother loves him, and that she has prepared food for him and the rest of the family. He believes these things, but his belief must go one step more before his hunger can be satisfied and his body can be nourished. He must actually sit down and eat. Believing in Christ for salvation is very much like this. The sinner may believe that he is a lost sinner and that Christ can save him, but before he can be saved, he must accept Christ's salvation (see Rom. 10:9 and John 1:12). It is so easy to be lost. All that is necessary is to neglect or refuse to accept Christ as Savior (see John 3:18). It is also easy to enter the door leading to

salvation. All one must do is deliberately to receive God's free gift of life (see Eph. 2:8-9), We remember always one important fact which must never be overlooked: THERE IS ONLY ONE WAY TO BE SAVED, for there is none other Name given us but that of the Lord Jesus (see Acts 4:12 and John 14:6).

HOW A CHRISTIAN SHOULD LIVE

The **third question** asked those who unite with a Presbyterian church is this: *Do you now resolve and promise, in humble reliance upon the grace of the Holy Spirit, that you will endeavor to live as a follower of Christ?* This question indicates that being a Christian makes a difference in the way a person lives. Before a person can faithfully make the promise which this question requires, he must know what the Christian life is and how he can go about living it. The book of 1 John calls on Christians to "walk in the light" and "walk in love." Walking in the light means knowing and following the will of God as it is revealed in the Bible (see Psa. 119:111,130). Walking in love means living a life of love toward God and others. Jesus said that love of God and love of our neighbors is the fulfillment of the law (Matt.22:36-40). Now this is not to suggest that we are saved because of the way we live! We are saved by believing in what Christ did for our salvation and receiving Him (Eph. 2:8-9). But we certainly will live in a different and better way because we are saved...because we are Christians. A Christian is a changed person, and he ought to live a changed life (2 Cor. 5:17). The same Christ who saves from sin will, by His Spirit, help believers live the kind of lives they ought to live: "As ye have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in

Him" (Col. 2:6). We receive Christ by faith. We must live the Christian life in the same way...by faith. This was Paul's secret of Christian living: "I can do all things through Christ which strengthened me"(Phil.4:13).

THE CHURCH AND ITS WORK

The **fourth question** asked prospective Presbyterian church members is: *Do you promise to support the church in its worship and work to the best of your ability?* Before anyone can honestly and intelligently say "yes" to this question, he must know something about the church and its work. The Bible describes the church as "the body of Christ." Christ is the Head of the body, and those who believe in Him as Lord and Savior are the members of the body. The work of the church is to worship God, to teach and preach the Bible, and to provide fellowship for its members. The church does its work through its teachers, preachers and missionaries; through its services and sacraments; through its organizations and activities; through its schools and colleges; through its boards and agencies; and through its literature. How can an individual church member support the worship and work of the whole church? One of the most important ways is by attending its services faithfully (Heb. 10:25). He can share in the work of the church by doing willingly whatever he is asked to do (Col. 3:23). Church members support the work of the church by their gifts. We believe every Christian ought to tithe - to give a tenth of his income to the work of the Lord (Mal. 3:10). But the most important way a church member can support his church is to pray for it. This is something which every member can do (1 Thess. 5:17).

The **fifth question** persons are asked when they become members of a Presbyterian church is this: "Do you submit yourselves to the government and discipline of the church, and promise to study its purity and peace?" In order to answer this question honestly, a person must know several things about the government of the church. Christ is the Head of the church. Members of the church look to Him alone as the Supreme Authority. The task of the church, then, is to teach, explain, and enforce the law of Christ as we find it in the Scriptures. The Presbyterian church has a constitution—a statement of what we believe the Bible teaches. This constitution has two main parts. The first is doctrinal—the teaching of the Bible about what we are to believe and how we are to live. This doctrinal part, sometimes called the Confession of Faith, is actually divided into three parts: The Confession of Faith proper, the Larger Catechism, and the Shorter Catechism. But the constitution also has a section on government, expressing what we believe the Bible teaches about how the church should be governed. The divisions of this *Book of Church Order* are: the *Form of Government*, *Rules of Discipline*, and the *Directory of Worship*. What does it mean when the Presbyterian church member promises to submit to the government and discipline of the church and to study its purity and peace? It means that he should know and obey the constitution of the church, and that he should honor the officers of the church as they teach and enforce the constitution. Into this fellowship, perhaps, the Lord Jesus has called you who read these pages. If so, may He, the great and only Head of the Church lead you into ever fuller experiences

of His grace and ever increasing usefulness in His kingdom, and to Him be the glory.

The Rev. Dr. Evans, at the time of his death in 1977, was executive secretary of the Asheville Presbytery, PCUS.

APPENDIX: THE CREED OF PRESBYTERIANS

Every statement of essential Calvinistic doctrine in our Standards, the Bible substantiates by equally bold and bald statements of its own. Yet the former is the chosen object of attack. The reason is plain. In a Christian land, where the Scriptures are widely revered, it is cheaper and safer to assault the Presbyterian Standards than to assault the Bible. Hence it is that the Presbyterian church has always sustained the brunt of the fight for the integrity of God's truth. "We gratefully acknowledge," said the Wesleyan Methodist Conference in its address to the Presbyterian Alliance, "the faithful and unfaltering testimony which your church has borne throughout her entire history on behalf of the divine inspiration and authority of the Word of God." Said the Baptist Association in its greeting to the same body: "The Presbyterian church has been the magnificent defender of the Word of God throughout the ages." Above all others, she has borne, bears now, and will continue to bear, on her name the odium, and upon her person the blows, provoked by and aimed against the Word of God. Humbly yet proudly she can say to her Lord, "The reproaches of them that reproach Thee fell on me." —Dr. Egbert Watson Smith

THE CREED OF PRESBYTERIANS: THE WESTMINSTER ASSEMBLY 1643-1648

The Westminster Assembly was a representative body, called by the English Parliament, made up of one hundred and twenty-one divines, eleven lords, twenty commoners, from all the counties of England and the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge, with seven commissioners from Scotland. Many of them jeopardized their livings by accepting Parliament's appointment and after the Restoration cheerfully sacrificed their earthly all for conscience' sake. It was an elect assembly. On every side were men conspicuous for learning, eloquence, and piety; professors not only of the sacred but also of the secular sciences; deans, masters, and heads of colleges, vice chancellors in the great universities. Their moderator was Dr. Twisse, scholar and theologian of continental fame, whose ruling passion may be inferred from his death-bed utterance, "Now, at length, I shall have leisure to follow my studies to all eternity." Nor were they scholars and theologians alone. Amongst them were thinkers of various types-orators, statesmen, hymnists, saints-men in every way qualified to voice the deepest religious convictions and embody in symbols and institutions which produced "statesmen like Hampden, soldiers like Cromwell, poets like Milton, preachers like Howe, theologians like Owen, dreamers like Bunyan, hymnists like Watts, commentators like Henry, saints like Baxter." Philip Schaff, the great church historian, said: "Whether we look at the extent or ability of its labors, or its influence upon future generations, it stands first among Protestant councils." -Dr. Egbert Watson Smith

PCA VISION 2000: PRESENTED TO THE 1987 GENERAL ASSEMBLY

As one communion in the worldwide church, the Presbyterian Church in America exists to glorify God by extending the kingdom of Jesus Christ over all individual lives through all areas of society and in all nations and cultures. To accomplish this end the PCA aims to fill the world with churches that are continually growing in vital worship, in theological depth, in true fellowship, in assertive evangelism and in deeds of compassion. The distinctiveness of the PCA lies in our stress on both reformation and revival. Without an emphasis on revival, "reformation" may become either a mimicking of political ideologies or sterile doctrinalism. Without an emphasis on reformation, "revival" may become a shallow pietism or mysticism. Only reformation and revival together can accomplish the Great Commission of our Lord. We are committed to the Scriptures and the historic Westminster Standards based firmly on a biblical theology that answers the questions and issues of each culture and people to which we minister. We are committed to worship that practices the presence and power of God within the church to the transformation of the surrounding culture through biblical application in population centers around the world. We are committed to the winning of new converts and their incorporation into the church through the ministry of the Word and to significant ministry to the needy through deeds of mercy and service. We are committed to the freedom of every member to minister through spiritual gifts and also to the responsibility to do so under spiritual and loving discipline. We are committed to dynamic, prophetic confrontation on

non-Christian thought forms and behavior and also to the demonstration of the truth through the practice of holiness and love in Christian fellowship. We are committed to guarding and strengthening the biblical family and also to a ministry to the broken family forms such as the divorced, the widowed and the unwed parent. We are committed to teaching and discipling men and women in the whole counsel of God and also to ministering to the needs of the whole person. True to the Scriptures, the reformed faith, and obedient to the Great Commission of Jesus Christ