



# The PCUSA Faith and Polity Project

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## Welcome!

## Letter From the Editor

Dear Fellow Presbyters,

More than ever, the circumstances unfolding in our denomination require us to have a good handle on what are the essentials of faith and polity. Some believe that nothing is cast in stone in the Book of Order or Confessions, or the Bible for that matter, and that in all cases the decision about what is essential for belief and behavior is up to a local governing body. I disagree with this view, because the PCUSA is a constitutional, confessional, and connectional body. We have agreed—through the constitutional process—to some essential tenets of faith and polity. These agreements bind church officers (anyone who has taken the ordination vows) to a Presbyterian way of life (polity) that is accountable to Christ and the Scriptures (faith).

The arguments for this view, that essentials we've agreed upon are binding, are presented in "The Faith and Polity Project." The articles downloaded here are also available on the PCUSAStandards.org website for your use and study. Some of them, like Larson are

faith-oriented—that is, they unpack theology that undergirds our understanding. Thompson and Watts write from an historical perspective, since "the way Presbyterians do things" has a long track record that can get distorted in the arguments. Dooling's article about Presbyterian case law and its applicability this year looks at the situation from a legal standpoint.

Thank you for showing an interest in our heritage and its authentic and true expression in the debates before the church. Our hope is that commissioners to General Assembly and presbyteries church-wide will find these resources helpful as we all—under the teaching guidance of the Holy Spirit—try to navigate through the faith and polity conundrum we are experiencing.

Yours in faith and humble obedience,

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Check out [pcusastandards.org](http://pcusastandards.org) for web versions of all these articles and other resources!

# Setting a Precedent

The effect of *Naegeli v. The Presbytery of San Francisco* and *Bierschwale v. The Presbytery of the Twin Cities Area* on *Maxwell v. The Presbytery of Pittsburgh*

by Rev. Dr. Robert D. Dooling, Loveland, CO

**Y**OU'VE RECEIVED THIS PAPER from *The Faith and Polity Project*. You may be reading it carefully, or you may be just flipping casually through its pages. Obviously you have some interest in the way in which we Presbyterians govern ourselves, or you wouldn't be looking at it at all. But, you may also suspect that the subject isn't all that interesting. Well, you're in for a surprise. In and of itself, the polity of our church may not be the most exhilarating of topics, but it is the source of never-ending debates and arguments. And, we all know how interesting debates and arguments can be. One historian has gone so far as to say that there is "blood on every page" of our church's Constitution. That's because it reflects the historic and ongoing struggles of a people trying to be faithful to the message of the gospel.

The Bible, of course, is our highest authority. But, in our Constitution we attempt to say clearly "who we are," "what we believe," and "what we intend to do." Because these are such important subjects, additions or amendments to the Constitution are made only by a careful process. Once made, however, they need to be interpreted and applied. Most often, this happens when conflicting understandings of the meaning of the Constitution are argued before a church court. Decisions by General Assembly's Permanent Judicial Commission (PJC) are considered to be Authoritative Interpretations of the Constitution.<sup>1</sup>

One of the more interesting considerations of the last fifty years, and one that has been the subject of any number of court cases and General Assembly actions, is the question of the degree to which a person who is seeking to be ordained to church office may be allowed to disregard a particular constitutional standard on the basis of a deeply held personal conviction. In "Presbyterian-ese," such a conviction is often called a "scruple."

While the debate over scrupling has a long and complicated history in our church, it came to the attention of Presbyterians again in 1974 when the Presbytery of Pittsburgh voted to ordain Mr. Walter Wynn Kenyon as a Minister. During his examination for ordination, Kenyon stated that for reasons of conscience he was unable to participate in the ordination of women. In spite of this "scruple," the presbytery sustained his examination, and voted to proceed to his ordination. However, the Rev. Jack Maxwell appealed the presbytery's action, and Kenyon's ordination was stayed. Maxwell held no animosity toward Kenyon, but felt that an important principle of Presbyterian governance was at stake – whether a presbytery has the authority to release an ordinand (i.e. a person seeking ordination to church office) from a responsibility that our constitutionally mandated ordination vows require.

The PJC of the Synod of Pennsylvania-West Virginia heard Maxwell's concern and overturned the presbytery's decision to ordain Kenyon. Synod's decision was then appealed to the General As-

sembly's PJC by the presbytery, and was upheld. In coming to its conclusion, the GAPJC made two seminal points:

1. A candidate's clearly stated refusal to comply with the requirements of the Constitution constitutes a negative answer to the fifth ordination question, "Do you endorse our Church's government, and will you honor its discipline?"
2. Neither a synod nor the General Assembly has any power to allow a presbytery to grant an exception to an explicit constitutional provision.

The principles set forth in the Maxwell decision have become key to the church's ongoing effort to define "who it is," "what it believes," and "what it intends to do." *Maxwell* authoritatively interprets the Constitution to say that a candidate for ordination may not be ordained if, during his/her examination, he/she states clearly that he/she intends to disregard or disobey any provision of the Constitution.<sup>2</sup>

It appears, however, that *Maxwell* did not settle the matter. As our culture has become more accepting of homosexual relationships, many in our church believe that the time has come to allow presbyteries to ordain candidates who publicly scruple the Constitution's ordination standard of "fidelity and chastity" (G-6.0106b). So, *Maxwell* is now being tested both in the governing bodies, and in the courts of our church.

For example, the Presbytery of San Francisco recently conducted a "final assessment" of the readiness of Ms. Lisa Larges for ordination to the office of Minister of Word and Sacrament.<sup>3</sup> At that time, Larges stated that for reasons of conscience she would refuse to comply with the provisions of G-6.0106b. Even so, the presbytery voted to certify her ready for ordination.

Convinced that the presbytery's decision was unconstitutional to the degree that it violated *Maxwell*, the Rev. Ms. Mary Naegeli and others filed a complaint with the Synod's PJC. Naegeli argued that like Kenyon's scruple, Larges' stated refusal to comply with G-6.0106b constituted a negative answer to the fifth ordination question, "Do you endorse our Church's government, and will you honor its discipline?"

As is often the case, however, with judicial commissions, the Synod's PJC avoided ruling on the substance of Naegeli's complaint by ruling, instead, on a procedural matter. The PJC found that Larges' statement did not constitute a refusal to comply with the Constitution because *it was not made in the context of an examination.*<sup>4</sup>

About the same time of Larges' "final assessment," the Presbytery of the Twin Cities Area met to restore Mr. Paul Capetz to the office of Minister of the Word and Sacrament. Capetz had previ-

ously been released from the exercise of ordained office because he objected to the provisions of G-6.0106b. Sometime later, believing that the political and theological tide was turning in the Presbyterian Church, he requested to be restored to office. In his written application for restoration, he stated that while he affirms “the Constitutional Questions asked of (him) at (his) ordination,” he would not affirm either G-6.0106b or the position of the PCUSA relative to the morality of homosexual relationships. He also stated that he refused “to take a vow of celibacy.”

Notwithstanding his clear refusal to comply with the Church’s Constitution, the Presbytery of the Twin Cities Area voted to restore Capetz to office. Believing that Capetz’s candid statement constituted “a negative answer to the fifth ordination question,” the Rev. Mr. David Bierschwale (and others) filed a complaint with the Synod’s PJC. The complaint asked that the action of the presbytery to restore Capetz be set aside.

However, before the complaint could be heard by the Synod’s PJC, the PJC’s Moderator dismissed it. He stated that the relief requested by Bierschwale (i.e. the setting aside of the presbytery’s action to restore Capetz) would unconstitutionally nullify Capetz’s ordination. He reasoned that once restored, Capetz’s ordination could be removed only as the result of a disciplinary proceeding.

Bierschwale appealed to the General Assembly’s PJC, but, as it did in *Naegeli*, the PJC ignored the substance of his complaint, and ruled only on process—upholding the decision of the Moderator of Synod’s PJC.<sup>5</sup>

The effect of the Bierschwale decision is twofold:

1. Persons requesting reinstatement to church office are apparently not subject to the requirements of *Maxwell*. During their examination they may, without necessary consequence, “scruple” provisions of the Constitution.
2. General Assembly’s PJC, however, made it absolutely clear that actual obedience to the Constitution is never optional for church officers, and that a presbytery has no power to waive such obedience. Therefore, all ministers, even those who may have stated a scruple in their examination for reinstatement, remain subject to disciplinary action if they actually violate the standards of their office.

So, *Maxwell* set the standard. It found that a candidate’s clearly stated refusal to comply with the requirements of the Constitution constitutes a negative answer to the fifth ordination question, “Do you endorse our Church’s government, and will you honor its discipline?” However, for a number of years, *Maxwell* has been under unremitting attack—primarily by those who desire relief from the Constitution’s standard of “fidelity and chastity.” So far, every effort to enforce *Maxwell* has been sidestepped by the courts. Instead of ruling on the substance of the issue, they have focused only on narrow procedural questions. And, in doing so, they have doubly injured the Church: they have left serious matters unresolved, and they have encouraged even more contentious litigation in the future.

In the metaphor of the constitutional historian referenced earlier, there is clearly more ecclesiastical blood to be shed.

But, there is one more complication.

Early in 2008, the 218th General Assembly received an overture from the Presbytery of John Knox asking for a new Authoritative Interpretation (AI) relative to the issue of scrupling, and the General Assembly responded with an affirmative vote. One of AI’s key provisions allows presbyteries the discretionary power, when examining candidates, to permit them to scruple any and all ordination standards—be those standards matters of faith or matters of practice.

For the time being, the new AI effectively voids *Maxwell*. It is likely, however, that its constitutionality will quickly be tested. If the new AI is overturned, *Maxwell* will remain the standard for ordination examinations. However, if it is upheld, there will be absolutely nothing to prevent a presbytery from allowing a candidate to be ordained who has openly and candidly stated that she/he intends to violate either the letter or the spirit of the Constitution.<sup>6</sup>

If that happens, it will plunge the Church into a constitutional crisis of unprecedented proportions. Therefore, it is incumbent upon all of us who love the Church to remain vigilant and attentive to the decisions of General Assembly’s Permanent Judicial Commission, and to be prepared to respond appropriately.

## Notes on “Precedent”

1. An Authoritative Interpretation is an interpretation of *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)* that carries the authority of the General Assembly and is binding on the governing bodies of the church. According to G-13.0103r in the *Book of Order*, these interpretations are made by the action of a General Assembly upon the advice of the Advisory Committee on the Constitution (ACC), or “through a decision of the Permanent Judicial Commission of the General Assembly in a remedial or disciplinary case. The most recent interpretation of a provision of the *Book of Order* shall be binding.”

2. Should this principle ever be overturned, the church would fall into an institutional contradiction in which it would be able to allow that which it does not permit, and to permit that which it does not allow. The ensuing constitutional crisis would surely devastate the church’s peace, unity and purity.

3. While the candidate’s name does not appear in the decision that ensues, neither party sought to hide the candidate’s identity which has been widely and publicly disseminated.

4. If you are interested in knowing more about this issue, read *Bush v. the Presbytery of Pittsburgh*. The Bush decision may be found at <http://www.pcusa.org/gapjc/decisions/pjc21810.pdf>. You should also note that since the Naegeli decision, Larges has again stated her refusal to comply with the Constitution—this time in an examination for ordination. Therefore, as I write, the matter is once again before the church’s courts.

5. For those of you who are legal “wonks,” let me invite you to follow me down a rabbit hole. In my opinion, the GAPJC made a cardinal error in the Bierschwale decision by making a distinction between a decision to reinstate ordination and a decision to ordain. In both cases membership in a presbytery is at stake, and in both cases the presbytery MUST examine the person’s fitness for membership – not just in the case of an ordination. Under G-6.0600a, the presbytery was required “[to] delete (Capetz’s) name from the appropriate roll.” Therefore, his application for restoration (which under G-6.0600c the presbytery must approve) should have included an examination for membership in the presbytery. So, the important issue is not whether a person has previously been ordained, but whether a presbytery has the responsibility to grant membership only to those who after an appropriate examination are found constitutionally to be qualified. Think about it, should Capetz, sometime in the future, request that his ordination be transferred to another presbytery, the receiving presbytery will be obligated to examine him. Then, should he again state a refusal to comply with any constitutional requirement, he would, under Maxwell, be ineligible for membership. Therefore, he should have been found ineligible for reinstatement by the Presbytery of the Twin Cities Area.

6. Actual disobedience will still be subject to disciplinary action.

# To What Authority Must Church Officers Submit?

by Elder Viola Larson, Sacramento, CA

JESUS, AFTER CALLING PETER to shepherd the sheep of his pasture, explains the kind of death awaiting Peter at the end of his ministry. Not metaphor, but reality—Peter will be crucified. Perhaps out of fear or jealousy Peter attempts to lay the charge on someone else. Seeing John the beloved disciple, he asks Jesus, “What about him, Lord?” And Jesus answers, “*If I want him to remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow me*” (John 21:22, NASB). From the beginning of the New Testament church, questions regarding authority have been important to discipleship. Jesus clearly demands our obedience, but what about obedience to Scripture? Whom or what must the Christian obey? What does submission look like? What is its foundation? This paper will explore obedience to Scripture versus obedience to Jesus Christ for the Presbyterian elder.

For too many in the postmodern church, Jesus Christ is held up as the singular authority minus much of Scripture. But when Jesus called Peter to obedience, was Scripture divorced from that demand? A proper understanding of the Bible, its authority, and how that fits with obedience to Christ and his authority is necessary.

The first question to ask is “What is the Bible?” The Westminster Confession (WC) states:

The authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed and obeyed, dependeth not upon the testimony of any man or church, but wholly upon God (who is truth itself). The author thereof; and therefore it is to be received, because it is the word of God.

Among the Scripture references given for this section of the WC is 2 Timothy 3:16. The text is extremely clear: “All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness.” New Testament Greek scholar William D. Mounce in his *Word Biblical Commentary: Pastoral Epistles* makes the point that both the pronouncement of the inspiration of Scripture and its use work together in this passage. He writes, “. . . utility of Scripture flows out of its inspiration. The entirety of Scripture comes from the mouth of God. To read it is to hear him speak. It is therefore true, and it can therefore be trusted.”

The WC goes on to insist that the believer’s ultimate understanding of Scripture as “infallible truth” with “divine authority” occurs because of the work of the Holy Spirit “bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts.” Additionally,

The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man’s salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequences may be deduced from Scripture:

unto which nothing at anytime is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men.

Other confessions in the *Book of Confessions* (BOC) speak to what the Bible is and to its authority. Questions and Answers 39 and 40 of the Shorter Catechism explain the duty of humanity to God as “obedience to his revealed will.” And the rule that God first revealed for humanity’s obedience is the moral law, which “is summarily comprehended in the Ten Commandments.”

The Second Helvetic Confession begins with this:

We believe and confess the canonical Scriptures of the holy prophets and apostles of both Testaments to be the true Word of God, and to have sufficient authority of themselves, not of men. For God himself spoke to the fathers, prophets, apostles, and still speaks through the Holy Scriptures.

And in this Holy Scripture, the universal Church of Christ has the most complete exposition of all that pertains to a saving faith, and also to the framing of a life acceptable to God; and in this respect it is expressly commanded by God that nothing be either added to or taken from the same.

Some have suggested that with the inclusion of the Confession of 1967 in the BOC the authority of Scripture is lost and now simply rests on Jesus Christ as God’s final revelation. But this is not true for several reasons. The text at the beginning of this confession states, “Confessions and declarations are subordinate standards in the church, subject to the authority of Jesus Christ, the Word of God, as the Scriptures bear witness to him.” Later, under the subtitle “The Bible,” it states:

The one sufficient revelation of God is Jesus Christ, the Word of God incarnate, to whom the Holy Spirit bears unique and authoritative witness through the Holy Scriptures, which are received and obeyed as the Word of God written. The Scriptures are not a witness among others, but the witness without parallel. The Church has received the books of the Old and New Testaments as prophetic and apostolic testimony in which it hears the Word of God and by which its faith and obedience are nourished and regulated.

To receive and obey the Bible as the written word of God, no matter what else may be said, defines the Bible as the Word of God. And indeed one must understand the Confession of 1967 by applying all of the other confessions in the PCUSA’s BOC to its text. Adding one confession to the book does not correct the others; there is no hierarchy of confessions. It is not possible to choose the authority of Christ over the authority of Scripture, and

the reason is both biblical and confessional. The reason is lodged in the person of Jesus Christ.

So, who is Jesus Christ? According to the confessions, Jesus is God. The Nicene Creed states he is “the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God . . .” According to the Bible, Jesus Christ is God. In Colossians the believer reads that Jesus, “the image of the invisible God,” created all things, holds all things together and all things were created for him” (Colossians 1:15-17). Also, “For in him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form” (Colossians 2:9).

The prologue to the Gospel of John is plain: “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw his glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:1&14). These two verses are further enforced by verse 18, “No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, he has explained him.”

Having established the divinity of Jesus, the next step is to connect him to his word, the Holy Scriptures. This includes a clarification of what it means to say that Jesus Christ is the one sufficient revelation of God. Since the Helvetic Confession states that the Scriptures have sufficient authority of themselves, do these two sufficient entities cancel each other out? Never!

## Notes on “Authority”

1. All Bible passages are from the *New American Standard Bible*, Reference Edition, (Foundation Publications, Inc.).

2. PC(USA), *Book of Confessions 2007*, 6.004. Italics mine.

3. William D. Mounce, *Word Biblical Commentary: Pastoral Epistles*, general eds., Bruce M. Metzger, David A. Hubbard, Glenn W. Barker, New Testament ed. Ralph P. Martin, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2000) 570.

4. *Book of Confessions*, 6.006a.

5. *Ibid.*, 7.040-7.041.

6. *Ibid.*, 5.001-5.002.

7. *Ibid.*, 9.03. d

The Bible’s authority is sufficient because it is the word of God, belonging to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, not certain parts of the word, not a word within the texts, but all of Scripture is the word of God. Scripture is the written words of Christ. To defame, deny, or even ignore any part of Scripture is to defame, deny, or ignore the sufficiency of Christ. For as long as the Church embraces the Nicene Creed and the Apostle’s Creed, she must also embrace both the authority of Jesus Christ and the authority of the Bible.

The Church’s understanding that the authority of the word resides in the authority of Christ can be applied to one of the more pressing issues in the PC(USA). That is the question of the ordination of self-affirming homosexuals. Here some have suggested that G-1.0100b in the *Book of Order* trumps G-6.0106b. That is, Christ “exercising his authority” in the calling of men and women to ministry overrides the requirement that those called to office lead “a life in obedience to Scripture” which includes living “either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman” or living in “chastity in singleness.”

The authority of Jesus Christ, the authority of the Bible, they are the same. Jesus Christ with his word, the Holy Scriptures, demands obedience. None may look past the words of Christ’s call to obedience unto death, which includes laying aside anything the Scripture calls sin. To clasp anything that the word of God calls sin is to hear, as Peter did, the words of Jesus, “What is that to you? You follow me.”

8. *Ibid.*, 9.27.

9. Although some translations interpret “begotten God” as “begotten Son,” the most ancient manuscripts assume the former. “There is a question as to whether the original reading here is . . . (*monogenēs huios*, one-of-a-kind Son) or . . . (*monogenēs Theos*, one-of-a kind [Son, himself] God). . . . The preponderance of the evidence now leans in the direction of the latter reading.” (Andreas J. Köstenberger, “Additional Note,” *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: John*, Robert Yarborough and Robert H. Stein, eds., [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004], 50.) See also William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: The Gospel of John*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1953), 90.

10. PC(USA), *Book of Order 2009/2011*, G-6.0100b and -6.0106b.

# A Walk Through the Woods

by Rev. Mary Holder Naegeli, Walnut Creek, CA

THERE ARE DEEP THEOLOGICAL flaws in some seemingly acceptable assertions being made in current debates about homosexuality and marriage. In order to sort these out, please join me on a walk through the forest of the PCUSA. Imagine yourself surrounded by the great redwood trees of California and be aware of its tightly intertwined root system. Though shallow by most standards, redwood roots extend laterally for great distances and weave themselves amongst the roots of nearby

trees. They are not “tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine” (Eph. 4:14). As we walk among these ancient spires, we are going to examine some very closely. I hope by the end of our tour you have gained an appreciation of the whole forest and can discern the diseased limbs causing infection within it. Mindful that this forest may seem at some points to be more like a maze, I offer the following nature trail guide to identify points of interest along the way.

## Trail Marker No. 1: The God-as-Trinity Tree

We start at the very center of the Presbyterian forest, the point around which all Presbyterian life revolves. It is a huge tree with many facets. The church coined the term “Trinity” to describe the great mystery of one God in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Trinity is a lively, relational fellowship of three distinct persons existing as one essence: God the Father, creator and sustainer of all that is and the initiator of relationship with that creation; Jesus Christ, the Son of God incarnate among us to inaugurate the Kingdom and to reconcile sinners to God; and the Holy Spirit indwelling believers to convict of sin, regenerate to new life, empower, and equip for ministry.<sup>1</sup> While describing their distinctions as we experience them, we also affirm that they are of one substance. So when we perceive the work of the Holy Spirit, we know that God is acting; when we believe in the saving work of Jesus Christ, we know that God was acting; and when the Father embraces us in covenant love, we know that God is acting. They cannot be separated from each other; one is not willing or capable—by God’s very nature— of “going rogue” to say or do something the other two would not. In support of this assertion, we recognize moments in the biblical narrative in which the Trinity is present:

1. Creation (Gen. 1 with Col. 1:15-17)
2. Anunciation (Luke 1:35)
3. The baptism of Jesus (Matt. 3:16f and par.)
4. Stephen’s stoning (Acts 7:55)

The Trinitarian formula for baptism was evident in the Great Commission of Jesus Christ, who commanded us to “baptize in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28:19f). These three are and act together.

So the Trinity represents one God, the God of the universe, the God above all gods, the God who existed in loving relationship even before human beings were created. While Jesus was teaching in the early first century, he referred to the mutuality of the Trinity of which he was one person: “The Father and I are one” (John 10:30); “When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf” (John 15:26). The Apostle Paul was well aware of this divine three-in-one when he observed, “And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” (Gal. 4:6).

We need this God-as-Trinity Tree firmly planted in our Presbyterian forest, because some in our midst want to separate Jesus from the Trinity as though only Jesus is to be obeyed, or attribute to the Holy Spirit ideas that are out of synchronization with the Trinity, as though the Spirit can add new and contradictory “revelations” to God’s word.

## Trail Marker No. 2: The Path Around the God-as-Trinity Tree

It is one of the mysteries of our faith that this God-as-Trinity Tree, under certain light conditions, can be seen or experienced as one of three trees

of its substance. As we walk around its circumference, we detect that there are specific aspects of this intertwined three-in-one tree worth examining. For now, note that they are all grounded together as one tree (do not ever forget this!) and cannot be separated to plant as individual trees in isolated parts of the forest. Nevertheless, we can make some observations at points marked on the trail.

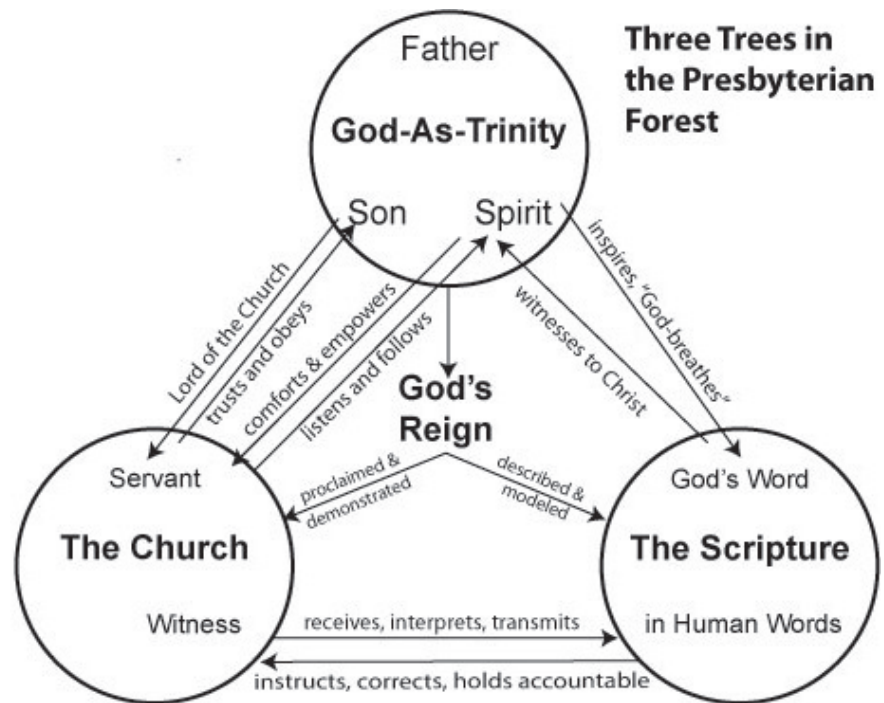
## Trail Marker No 3: The God as Jesus Christ Tree

*Jesus as Lord of All.* The first sermons by post-Pentecost disciples proclaimed, “Jesus Christ is Lord of all!” (Acts 10:36 [Peter], and 17:24 [Paul]), identifying for us the central affirmation of the Christian Church for all ages. In ringing tones throughout the New Testament, Jesus Christ is exalted and praised. He is unsurpassed in power, rule, and authority. There is no one higher than this One who relinquished the prerogatives of heaven, took upon himself full humanity while retaining his deity, was born of a virgin, lived a sinless life, healed many, declared and demonstrated the Kingdom of God, died on the cross, rose again on the third day, and ascended into heaven (Phil. 2:5-11). The *Book of Order (BOO)* says,

“All power in heaven and earth is given to Jesus Christ by Almighty God, who raised Christ from the dead and set him above all rule and authority, all power and dominion, and every name that is named . . .”<sup>2</sup>

The apostle Paul proclaimed this “one Lord” (1 Cor. 8:6, Eph. 4:5) who is now “seated at [God’s] right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named . . .” (Eph. 1:20f).

As we ponder this Jesus, we become aware that different people may be picturing a different Jesus, depending on their theological presuppositions. A recent issue of *Christianity Today* offered a helpful cover story by professor Scot McKnight that reflected on efforts to discover the “real” Jesus.<sup>3</sup> He challenges us to consider



what we mean when we say “the Real Jesus”: is it the Jewish Jesus, seen as the son of Jewish parents, student of Jewish rabbis, victim of Jewish political clashes? Is Jesus the Canonical Jesus, the one interpreted by the four gospel writers as Messiah, Son of God, and the agent of God’s redemption? Is Jesus the Orthodox Jesus, reflecting the amplified understanding of Jesus developed by the theologians of the early church? Does one mean the Historical Jesus, the person behind all the testimonies about him, reconstructed by scholars on the basis of modern historical methods? Or perhaps, one is referring—honestly now—to the Personal Jesus, the personality you and I have each projected onto Jesus Christ and likely cast in our own image?

When challengers of basic Presbyterian faith and polity insist that we are to obey Jesus Christ (in contrast to obeying Scripture), which Jesus are they talking about? What other Jesus do we have than the one who is revealed to us in the Scriptures (the Canonical Jesus) and proclaimed as Lord, Savior, Teacher, Son of God, and Messiah (the Orthodox Jesus)? The assertions of these challengers must be examined for the possibility that their Jesus can be separated from Scripture and the witness of the Church. But more on that later, when we get to the Scripture Tree.

*Jesus as Head of the Church.* The authority of Jesus as Lord extends into the life of the Church, over which Christ is “head of the body, the church” (Col. 1:18). God has “put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body” (Eph. 1:22). Presbyterians put it this way: “The Church, as Christ’s body, is bound to his authority,” which means that any authority the church might perceive itself to have is derived from the authority of Jesus, the basis for our mission.<sup>4</sup> Jesus himself makes this clear in the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19f): “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.” Jesus as Lord of all and head of the church expects that his people will do as he says. But mystified, Jesus once asked, “Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I tell you?” (Luke 6:46)

If we are sincere in calling Jesus Christ the Lord of all and the head of the church, we must also be sincere and guileless in our willingness to follow where he leads and do what he says. This is the essence of “obedience to Christ.”

#### **Trail Marker No. 4: The Path Between the God-As-Jesus Tree and the Church Tree**

As we continue around the periphery of the God-as-Trinity Tree, we notice there are a few pathways leading out from the center. We will first take the path that links the God-As-Jesus Tree to the Church Tree. Later we will come back to this same spot, and take the path from the God-As-Holy-Spirit Tree to the Scripture Tree. As we circle the Church Tree, we will discover that a trail links it also to the Scripture Tree by a two-way path, so follow this guide to keep you from getting lost.

The church’s origins rest with God, whose covenant with Israel

extended to include those who would follow Jesus the Messiah (Eph. 2:11-21). Jesus brought the church into being, not as an ecclesiastical structure but as a community of faith gathered around knowing him. His intention was that his disciples, after his departure, would carry on the work of proclaiming and demonstrating the Kingdom of God to the world. He imparted authority to the church to do this, after Peter’s profession of faith: “. . . on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (Matt. 16:18-19).

### **As we circle the Church Tree, we will discover that a trail links it also to the Scripture Tree by a two-way path.**

Pentecost, commonly identified as the birthday of the church, more accurately was the day that the already existing community of faith was empowered to proclaim the gospel. Previously, Jesus had given it the authority to do so. This link will become important as we explore more fully the call of the church, but along this pathway we are reminded

that any strength, authority, or power the church might possess has been imparted by Jesus Christ and is derivative of his own authority. The church is not to act on its own or do what is right in its own eyes, but to come back to its roots in obedience to Jesus Christ. This is the essence of the classic affirmation, “The church reformed, always to be reformed,” according to the Word of God and the call of the Spirit.<sup>5</sup> The church re-forms by re-turning (repenting) to its biblical roots after wandering down bunny trails of false belief or scandalous practice.

#### **Trail Marker No. 5: The Church Tree**

The roots of this God-planted Church Tree run deeply through the history of Israel, when God’s intention to establish a covenant relationship with faithful people (starting with Abraham) was revealed. The seed of righteousness based on faith was planted in Abraham’s heart (Rom. 4:16), and those who followed in his footsteps were declared part of God’s set-apart people. So when Jesus invited his (Jewish) disciples to believe in him and thereby know the Father (John 14:7), and when Peter introduced Gentiles to the Savior (starting in Acts 10:9-44), both were demonstrating God’s intention that all who believed in Jesus Christ would be counted among God’s People made righteous in him. To this day, a declared faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior is all that is required for membership in a Presbyterian church.<sup>6</sup>

*The Church empowered by the Holy Spirit.* “Christ calls the Church into being, giving it all that is necessary for its mission to the world, for its building up, for its service to God.”<sup>7</sup> Its mission to the world is to make disciples, to introduce them to the worship and service of God, to teach them everything Jesus had commanded, and to demonstrate Kingdom living in the world.<sup>8</sup> We are not left to figure this out entirely on our own, nor are we expected to draw upon mere human strength. Jesus had said, just before he left, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). The first sign of the Spirit’s outpouring was the miraculous proclamation of the gospel among Jerusalem pilgrims in their own languages. That same Spirit, which we will examine later, brought to

life the movement that gathered and deployed those who would “turn the world upside down” (Acts 17:6).

*The Church instructed by the Word of God.*<sup>9</sup> God gave a second equipping gift to the church. Even before the New Testament books were gathered into a “canon,”<sup>10</sup> the people of God were in possession of the Old Testament. The books of Moses (the Pentateuch, or first five books of the Bible), the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings, collected the written testimonies to God’s redeeming work in the world. The reality that YHWH God wanted to be known by name (Exod. 3:13), have an ongoing relationship with Abraham and his progeny (Gen. 12:1-3), and define the terms of covenant in life-giving ways (Exod. 20) is staggering evidence of God’s great love and care. God is not coy, arbitrary, or playing hard-to-get; from the very beginning God has wanted to be in open and unhindered relationship with human beings. In the course of this great story of God and his creation, God gave commandments that, when observed, would keep us in fellowship with God’s purposes. To stray from these meant unchaperoned forays into the dangerous territory of “life on one’s own.”<sup>11</sup> So the Old Testament—“Scripture” to first century followers of Jesus—described a way of life and wooed God’s people into saving relationship with their creator and sustainer. Jesus quoted from the Old Testament regularly; the Scriptures guarded his heart when tempted (Luke 4:1-12); his vocabulary for communicating his own calling was found in Isaiah (Luke 4:18); and the foundation for the redemptive purposes of God through Jesus Christ was articulated in the overarching story of God’s covenant people Israel. Jesus himself taught from the Law and demonstrated not only the letter of the Law but also its spirit (Matt. 5-7), helping his followers to discover faith as a way of life rather than a set of meaningless rote rules to follow.

It was the responsibility of the church to receive this Word, to put it into action, and to transmit it (Luke 5:8-15). On the corporate level, the Church was God’s agent for collating, affirming, and distributing the word of God written. On the personal level, the apostle Paul was acutely aware that he had received a precious gift of God’s self-revelation in the Scriptures, and considered it a sacred trust to pass on to others. “For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures . . .” (1 Cor. 15:3-8).

### Trail Marker No. 6: The Path From the Church Tree to the Scripture Tree

This trail goes in both directions between the Church Tree to the Scripture Tree. We have described how, through the witness and work of the Church (inspired and directed by the Holy Spirit), we came to possess the Scriptures and share God’s Word with the *world*. In this limited sense, the Scriptures are mediated to the world by the Church. However, the Scripture as God’s word written imparts God’s will upon the *Church* through instruction, information, and correction, and thereby holds the Church and its members accountable to the will of God (2 Tim 3:16).

### Trail Marker No. 7: The Scripture Tree

As we approach this redwood of the faith, a walk around its periphery reveals a connecting path that heads straight back to the God-As-Spirit Tree embedded as One of Three in the Trinity Tree,

where we started. In order for us to appreciate fully all the aspects of the Scripture Tree, we must trace its roots from the Trinity Tree, since one of Scripture’s hallmarks is that the word written gives an authentic and sufficient witness to the saving Lordship of Jesus Christ. “The one sufficient revelation of God is Jesus Christ, the Word of God incarnate, to whom the Holy Spirit bears unique and authoritative witness through the Holy Scriptures, which are received and obeyed as the word of God written.”<sup>12</sup> So our discussion pathway leads us back to God, Three in One—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—the God who wants to be known.

### Trail Marker No. 8: The God-As-Spirit Tree

The Holy Spirit is God eternally present with us (John 14:16), dwelling in our hearts by faith (Rom. 5:5). The Spirit was sent by God as an Advocate, a witness on Jesus’ behalf (John 15:26), our intercessor (Rom. 8:27), to convict us of sin (John 16:8), to bring us to life in Christ (Rom. 8:9-11), and to endow us with spiritual gifts for the work of ministry (1 Cor. 12:4-11). All the Holy Spirit does is intended to bring people to an authentic, vital, and pure relationship with Jesus Christ.

The Nicene Creed affirms that the Holy Spirit is One with the Father and the Son.<sup>13</sup> The Spirit, while making Christ known to individual believers and the church, does not fabricate anything that is contradictory to the self-disclosure of God in the Scriptures.<sup>14</sup> The Spirit speaks what the Spirit hears from God-As-Trinity, just as Jesus did only what he saw his Father doing (John 5:19). “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come” (John 16:13). This unity of the Trinity is what makes our union with Christ possible: the Spirit of God acts upon and within us to invite us into a right relationship with the Father, provided by the atoning work of the Son. The Spirit has no plans whatsoever to take us by any other path than “the Way, the Truth, and the Life” (John 4:6) to the heart of our loving Father.<sup>15</sup>

The Holy Spirit is given to those who believe in Christ. Peter made the connection clear in his first sermon after Pentecost: “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38). While the Holy Spirit is at work *on* all people, the indwelling Spirit’s work *within* is limited to Christian believers, because the Spirit cannot be separated from Jesus Christ, who waits to be invited into one’s heart.

The Holy Spirit as One of Three participated in the writing of Scripture. When Paul reminded Timothy that “all scripture is inspired by God,” he used the word literally translated “God-breathed.” *Theo* is “God” and *pneustos* is “breathed” from the same word for “spirit,” *pneuma*. The Spirit is at work in and through Scripture, having been present and active when it was written and present now as it is read and preached. The Spirit has a vested interest in God’s people getting the Word right, because the Scripture is the Spirit’s word to the church. The Word of God is known to Paul as “the sword of the Spirit” (Eph. 6:17). One can test any assertion attributed to the Spirit by evaluating its consistency with the written word of God. The authority of the Bible in the church is based squarely on the work of the Trinity, working in concert to make known God’s will and way to those God calls his own.

With the origins of Scripture recognized as coming from God, we can now return to the Scripture Tree for a closer look.

## Back to Trail Marker No. 7: The Scripture Tree

*God's Word.* While saying that the Scripture is “God-breathed” or “inspired,” it is not sufficient to say that the Bible contains inspired passages or is simply inspiration to us. It would also be inaccurate to say that parts of the Scripture can exist alone as Scripture, because it takes all of Scripture to accomplish—infallibly and authoritatively (Isa. 55:6-11)—what God wills. We know what God intends this self-revelation to achieve because of the claims it makes (cf. 2 Tim 3:16f); the Holy Spirit, at work in the written word and dwelling in our hearts, confirms that this is indeed God speaking as *living* word. The Scripture is God's ongoing word to humanity.

*In human words.* We also affirm that the Bible is God's Word expressed in human words. God chose to make this self-revelation in ordinary human language, so we could hear it. The Scripture itself is not God,<sup>16</sup> but it infallibly points to God as one who wants to be in covenant with us through Jesus Christ. God's Word in human words demonstrates that God desires full participation with humanity; and Jesus entered our world in time and space, language and locale, in order to make reconciliation with God possible.

*Bearing a living witness to Jesus Christ.* “The church confesses the Scriptures to be the Word of God written, witnessing to God's self-revelation. Where that Word is read and proclaimed, Jesus Christ the Living Word is present by the inward witness of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>17</sup> We have two biblical examples of the Scriptures pointing to Jesus Christ. On the road to Emmaus, Jesus talked to two confused disciples who were trying to sort out the events of Easter day: “Beginning with Moses and all the prophets, [Jesus] interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures” (Luke 24:27). Philip, a gifted evangelist, shares Christ with an Ethiopian pilgrim returning from Jerusalem: “Philip ran up to [the chariot] and heard [the Ethiopian] reading the prophet [Isaiah]. . . . Then Philip, starting with this scripture, proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus” (Acts 8:29-35).

*Authoritative in the life of the church and the believer.* By virtue of its divine origin, the word of God carries the authority of its author: “The one sufficient revelation of God is Jesus Christ, the Word of God incarnate, to whom the Holy Spirit bears unique and authoritative witness through the Holy Scriptures, which are received and obeyed as the word of God written.”<sup>18</sup> This “receiving and obeying” brings us back to the path between the Scripture Tree and the Church Tree, in that the word of God is given to the church as the sufficient statement of God's heart, mind, and expectation for the people of God. The Bible is our rule for “faith and manners.”<sup>19</sup> The authority of Scripture lies in its ability “to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Heb. 4:12).

*Properly understood.* The task becomes “rightly explaining the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15). “First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God” (2 Pet. 1:20f). We understand that the word both in its parts and in its entirety requires interpretation, which, we believe, must

be guided first by the Holy Spirit through Scripture, and then by the confessional statements of the church. Scripture is the lens through which we see God's will clearly. Human beings are not the lens, and our eyes are clouded by spiritual cataracts. We need the Scripture to bring God's will into focus.<sup>20</sup> Paul's exhortation to Timothy was to remain faithful to the word of God, to study it, teach it, and not be persuaded to change the message when orthodoxy became unfashionable or dangerous (2 Tim. 3:10-7).

The New Testament writers understood the church's authority to rest solely upon its faithfulness to the Word of God. Foundational principles of the Presbyterian Church (USA) acknowledge this important link: “All Church power is only ministerial and declarative; that is, *the Holy Scriptures are the only rule of faith and manners*; . . . all the decisions of a church governing body should be founded upon the *revealed will of God*.”<sup>21</sup>

Out of the church's understanding of Scripture come standards, which bind church officers to a pattern of behavior that relies on the grace of God, repents of sin, and exhibits the fruit of the Spirit. “Among these standards is the requirement” that church officers “live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman (W-4.9001), or chastity in singleness.”<sup>22</sup> This is a biblical standard, fully supported not only by Scripture but also by the church's teaching in our Confessions.

But it is precisely here, at the point on the trail where the Word of God must be interpreted, that we find challengers to Presbyterian faith and polity obscuring the path.

**Bunny Trail No. 1:** “We can accept the authority of the Scripture, but reject the church's interpretation of the Scripture related to homosexuality or same-sex marriage.”

The controversies in the PCUSA revolve around “rightly explaining the word of truth.” It would be a brazen denial to say that the Bible has no authority in matters related to homosexuality, and few would make such a denial. Rather, challengers of Presbyterian faith and polity seek to *interpret* the authoritative word of God in a way that allows for the very behavior Scripture unequivocally condemns.<sup>23</sup> We can only appeal to the plain meaning of Scripture in both the Old and New Testaments, the complete lack of any modulation or softening of that meaning as the Scripture unfolds (between Lev. 18:22 and 1 Cor. 6:9), and a strong Genesis-based understanding of marriage complementarity (Gen. 1:27f, 2:18-25) to make this case. Furthermore, the witness of the church—through its confessional interpretations of the Scripture through the centuries—rejects the notion that homosexual behavior is acceptable.<sup>24</sup>

**Bunny Trail No. 2:** “The Holy Spirit is re-interpreting the Word of God, and we must be open to the new thing God is doing.”

Believing that “Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, today, and forever” (Heb. 13:8) and that the Triune God is unified in purpose, message, and ministry, we reject any “new thing” contrary to God's word that might be attributed to the Holy Spirit. Rather, we see this as blasphemy: attributing something to the Spirit that is undue, untrue, or defaming. “Reformed and always being reformed, according to the Word of God” does not entitle us to invent something totally new or unheard of or contradictory to the church's teaching. What *is* new, and accomplished by the Holy

Spirit, is a regenerated responsiveness to Jesus Christ, Lord of All, and repentance made possible by the kindness of God (Rom. 2:4).

**Bunny Trail No. 3:** “It is wrong to say that we are to obey Scripture (as in G-6.0106b). Rather, we are called to obey Jesus Christ to which Scripture gives witness.”

Implicit in this assertion is that, somehow, Jesus is detached from the word of God. You can see how this would be possible if one rejected a Canonical or Orthodox Jesus in favor of a Personal Jesus. However, the link between the Word Become Flesh and the Word Written forged by the interlocking roots between the God-as-Trinity Tree and the Scripture Tree has been demonstrated above. It is something relatively new to claim that the word of God does not require our obedience; but in the era of historical-critical inquiry of the Scriptures, the humanness of the Bible has wrongly diminished the church’s confidence in the affirmations of biblical infallibility and authority.

On the particular topic of homosexuality, it is claimed that because Jesus is silent on the issue, we are free to take that silence as approval of some sort of sexual arrangement we deem appropriate or acceptable. But Jesus quotes Genesis 2:24 as the defining word

on marriage, obligating us to measure all other sexual relationships against that standard (Matt. 19:5).

We must be very careful, lest we fall into Eve’s sin. Eve could be said to have followed her conscience, by regarding the forbidden fruit and coming to the very-well-meaning conclusion that it was “good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise” (Gen. 3:6). But her decision failed the most basic test of the well-shaped conscience, obedience to God’s word.

## Conclusion

Just as a redwood forest is tied together by the interlocking roots of its trees, the Presbyterian Forest is grounded in the Trinity, to which the Church and the Scriptures are linked. When we understand that God does not act or speak at cross-purposes with himself, our doctrines of divine revelation, knowledge, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, and the Church all fall into place. The debates before us are not “only about sex,” but about the very biblical and theological roots of our faith! So “keep your head in all situations” (2 Tim. 4:5, NIV) and take fellow Presbyterians for a walk through the Presbyterian forest.

## Notes on “Walk”

1. PCUSA, *Book of Confessions 2007*, Scots Confession, 3.01: “We confess . . . one God alone; one in substance and yet distinct in three persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.”

2. PCUSA, *Book of Order 2009/2011*, G-1.0100a.

3. Scot McKnight, “The Jesus We’ll Never Know,” *Christianity Today* 54, no. 4, (April 2010) 22-28.

4. *Book of Order*, G-1.0100d.

5. *Ibid.*, G-2.0200.

6. *Ibid.*, G-5.0200.

7. *Ibid.*, G-1.0100b.

8. The formal Presbyterian statement of the “Great Ends of the Church” as “the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind; the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God; the maintenance of divine worship; the preservation of the truth; the promotion of social righteousness; and the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world” (*Book of Order*, G-1.0200).

9. Historically, the terms “Word of God” and “Scripture” have taken on different meanings. The confessions, most notably the 2nd Helvetic Confession (1566) and the Westminster Confession (1646) use the phrase “Word of God” synonymously with the Scripture. For our purposes here, Scripture and word of God (small “w”) will both refer to the written corpus, and the Word will refer to Christ (after John 1:1) and the *logos* of God.

10. This transmission included the citation from books of the New Testament by church fathers in early second century; Athanasius in 367AD was the first to name all the NT books that would later be identified as canonical, a step finally taken at the Council of Hippo in 393AD. (F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* [Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 1988], 209, 232.)

11. Referred to in heartbreaking fashion by Paul in Romans 1, in which—three times—it is observed that “God gave them up” to the lust of their hearts (1:24), degrading passions (1:26), and to a debased mind” (1:28).

12. *Book of Confessions*, Confession of 1967, 9.27.

13. *Ibid.*, 1.3.

14. *Ibid.*, Westminster Confession, 6.006.

15. Our confessions are quite clear that Jesus is the only way to salvation: “Jesus, the only savior and redeemer,” Heidelberg Catechism, 4.030; “Jesus Christ is the only Savior of the World, and the true, awaited Messiah,” Second Helvetic Confession, 5.077; “very God and very man, yet one Christ, the only Mediator between God and man,” Westminster Confession, 6.044; “The only Redeemer of God’s elect is the Lord Jesus Christ . . .” Westminster Shorter Catechism, 7.021; “Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death,” Theological Declaration of Barmen, 8.11.

16. Donald Bloesch uses the analogy, “The Bible is the Word of God as a light bulb is related to light. The light bulb is not itself the light but its medium” (*Holy Scripture: Revelation, Inspiration & Interpretation* [Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1994], 59).

17. *Book of Order*, W-2.2001.

18. *Book of Confessions*, Confession of 1967, 9.27.

19. Historic Principle of Church Order, number 7, found in *Book of Order*, G-1.0307.

20. “For just as the eyes, when dimmed with age or weakness or by some other defect, unless aided by spectacles, discern nothing distinctly; so such is our feebleness, unless Scripture guides us in seeing God, we are immediately confused” (Calvin, *Institutes*, I/14:1).

21. *Book of Order*, G-1.0307.

22. *Ibid.*, G-6.0106b.

23. A thorough treatment of the biblical witness regarding homosexuality can be found in Robert A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001). A progressive approach, which insists that all the direct prohibitions against homosexual behavior can be dismissed either on the basis of cultural context or an overarching rule of love, is typified by Jack Rogers, *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2006).

24. e.g. *Book of Confessions*, Heidelberg Catechism, 4.087.

# Conscience: Its Uses and Limits

by Rev. Dr. John L. Thompson, Fuller Theological Seminary, CA

“**H**ERE I STAND, I can do no other. . . .” Martin Luther uttered these lines to the Emperor and Papal representatives at the Diet of Worms in 1521, refusing to disavow his books and writings. These are the famous words that some regard not only as chartering the Protestant Reformation, but as establishing the freedom of individual conscience at its foundation. Yet as they stand here, these words are an equally famous instance of selective quotation. It is true that Luther took his stand on conscience, but neither Luther nor Calvin ever imagined the sort of individualism and autonomy that have come to define the conscience of many today, including many Christians. It is worth recalling Luther’s reply to the Emperor at greater length:

Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. I cannot do otherwise, here I stand, may God help me, Amen.<sup>1</sup>

Luther’s fuller remarks make it clear that while he did indeed take his stand on conscience, his conscience was itself “captive to the word of God”—determined not by his independent judgment per se, but ultimately by what he had been taught by the Bible. In other words, while Luther had strong convictions, based on conscience, he truly was willing to be corrected by Scripture and change his mind.

## Let Your Conscience *Have* a Guide

Luther’s keen awareness of how conscience must depend on the authority of Scripture was shared by John Calvin and came to permeate the Reformed tradition. It is repeatedly affirmed in our own “Historic Principles of Church Order,” which dates from 1788 and begins with a direct quote from the Westminster Confession, that “God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in anything contrary to his Word, or beside it, in matters of faith or worship.”<sup>2</sup> The central and prior place of the Bible is unmistakable here. Indeed, the Bible is “the only rule of faith and manners,” so that “no Church governing body ought to pretend to make laws to bind the conscience in virtue of their own authority” but rather base “all their decisions . . . upon the revealed will of God.”<sup>3</sup> What’s especially significant is that the Reformed tradition (like Luther) is perfectly willing to bind the conscience, but only to the word of God and not to human traditions. For while the conscience is a wonderful organ, it can be misdirected by sin and error—just like all our other parts—and that is why we can let our conscience be our guide only when our conscience has a guide, namely, the higher authority of God’s word, God’s rules, and God’s laws.

## Conscience and the Hierarchy of Authority

Many of us, of course, will be quick to note that Presbyterians do, in fact, contrive new rules and laws—lesser laws, to be sure, and rules that attempt not to circumvent or flout the Bible but to interpret and apply it. Implicit within these “historic principles” is a deep suspicion of human authority, because our own weakness (our total depravity, if you will) is always liable to distort and subvert even our best intentions. Accordingly, this same passage affirms (much as Luther did) that “all synods and councils may err”—presumably, even Presbyterian and Reformed ones—on account of “the frailty inseparable from humanity.”<sup>4</sup>

Deference to Scripture is thus a safeguard, for “there is much greater danger from the usurped claim of *making* laws than from the right of *judging* upon laws already made and common to all who profess the gospel.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, it is better that we should strive for the right interpretation and application of the precepts God has already given us in the Bible than that we should ever presume to contrive new rules and laws that claim anything like the allegiance we owe to Scripture. That is also why the hierarchy of constitutional authority in our church runs only one way: from the Bible, through the *Book of Confessions*, to the *Book of Order*.

Remarkably, and despite the wariness of the historic principles regarding making new laws and rules, Presbyterians are quite good at all sorts of legislation, as we can see from the ever-expanding *Book of Order* itself or from the mountains of paper generated by General Assembly. To be sure, part of that impulse is scriptural: the Bible itself exhorts us to act for decency and order, and those values require careful deliberation and, quite often, rules for how to *be* biblically decent and ordered.

At the same time, it is a virtue of Presbyterian polity to recognize that there is always a dialogue if not outright tension between the consciences of individual Christians and the less-than-unanimous consensus that church bodies may hold as to what the Bible may mean or how the Bible is to be applied. Majority decisions and discernment regarding the meaning of the Bible *are* determinative for the church, but not by silencing minority voices and not by pretending that we all read the Bible in exactly the same way. Again, the *Book of Order* speaks eloquently:

It is necessary to the integrity and health of the church that the persons who serve in it as officers shall adhere to the essentials of the Reformed faith and polity as expressed in the *Book of Confessions* and the Form of Government. So far as may be possible without serious departure from these standards, without infringing on the rights and views of others, and without obstructing the constitutional governance of the church, freedom of conscience with respect to the interpretation of Scripture is to be maintained. It is to be recognized, however, that

in becoming a candidate or officer . . . one chooses to exercise freedom of conscience within certain bounds. His or her conscience is captive to the Word of God as interpreted in the standards of the church so long as he or she continues to seek or hold office in that body.<sup>6</sup>

The passage impressively balances freedom and authority, the corporate and the individual. At the end of the day, however, the identity and integrity of the church must not be set aside.

### Using the Conscience Conscientiously

In the passage cited earlier from the Westminster Confession, a good deal of its advice was prompted by memories of Roman Catholic abuses in the form of human laws that had bound the conscience of Christians by claiming (for instance) that ignoring a Lenten fast could endanger one's salvation. However, as that passage continues, it is evident that the Westminster divines were worried not only about those who believed too much, but also those who believed too little.

Accordingly, the Confession repudiates dogmas that lack biblical foundation, for "to believe such doctrines, or to obey such commandments out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience."<sup>7</sup> But at the same time, the very next sentence warns us against all those who would use conscience as a cloak for immorality: "They who, upon pretense of Christian liberty, do practice any sin, or cherish any lust, do thereby destroy the end of Christian liberty; which is, that, being delivered out of the hands of our enemies, we might serve the Lord without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him, all the days of our life."<sup>8</sup> In other words, if sometimes the conscience sounds a false alarm and needs the guidance of Scripture to correct it, there are other times when the conscience is silent (or, worse, has itself been silenced by bad faith or bad habit) and needs to be reactivated and recalibrated according to biblical standards and God's call to holiness.

Yet not all consciences work the same or register identical feelings or convictions. Recently, we have begun to revive an interest in the old practice of "scrupling," of registering our doubts or reservations about majority declarations. One always hopes that such scruples or hesitations will not be on essential matters of faith or morals, but sometimes they are. Then it becomes a matter for the church to discern just how essential or how tolerable the scruple may be. Such situations are addressed in our *Book of Order* in considering protest and dissent. G-9.0304 thus approves

"decorous and respectful" protests as expressions of our "right of conscience"—but it does not thereby countenance disobedience, even on the part of those who protest.

The same principle is even more helpfully addressed in a footnote to G-6.0108b that takes us back all the way to 1758: "When any matter is determined by a major vote, every member shall either actively concur with or passively submit to such determination; or if his conscience permit him to do neither, he shall, after sufficient liberty modestly to reason and remonstrate, peaceably withdraw from our communion without attempting to make any schism."

This stark but irenic account goes on to add that the counsel for withdrawal really bears only on "indispensable" matters of doctrine or polity, yet it remains salutary advice, a reminder that the church is and must be governed first and foremost by the word of God, which our consciences must *obey*, not *oppose*.

I have my own rule of thumb here. I constantly ask myself, in order to check any rise of smugness or complacency, Can the Bible tell me or my conscience *anything* that I'd prefer not to know? If the Bible's precepts ever cease to challenge or nag at me, I ought to start worrying that my own "human frailty" has stepped out of its rightful role as pupil and needs to return to Scripture, to that which Calvin himself regarded as "the school of the Holy Spirit."<sup>9</sup>

### Further Reading

1. Randall C. Zachman. *The Assurance of Faith: Conscience in the Theology of Martin Luther and John Calvin*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1993. (Especially chapter one, "The Idolatrous Religion of Conscience").
2. Thomas F. Merrill. Introduction to *William Perkins, 1558–1602, English Puritanist: His Pioneer Works on Casuistry: "A Discourse of Conscience" and "The Whole Treatise of Cases of Conscience"*. Nieuwkoop: De Graaf, 1966.
3. Margo G. Houts. "A Balancing Act." What Presbyterians Believe. *Presbyterians Today* (March 2003). <http://www.pcusa.org/today/believe/past/mar03/balancing.htm> (accessed April 16, 2010).
4. PC(USA). *195th General Assembly Report: Historic Principles, Conscience, and Church Government*. (Louisville: Office of the General Assembly, 1983). <http://www.pcusa.org/oga/publications/historic-principles.pdf> (accessed April 16, 2010).

### Notes on "Conscience"

1. English text is from "Luther at the Diet of Worms," in *Luther's Works*, vol. 32: *The Career of the Reformer II* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958), 112.

2. PC(USA), *Book of Order 2009/2011*, G-1.0301.

3. *Ibid.*, G-1.0307

4. *Ibid.*

5. *Ibid.*, G-1.0305, slightly repunctuated; italics mine.

6. *Ibid.*, G-60108ab.

7. PC(USA). *Book of Confessions 2007*. Westminster Confession 6.109.

8. *Ibid.*, WC 6.110.

9. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559) 3.21.3.

# Conscience In Context

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“GOD ALONE IS LORD of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in anything contrary to his Word, or beside it, in matters of faith or worship.”<sup>1</sup> Viewed casually and apart from context, this appeal to freedom of conscience from the Westminster Confession and the *Book of Order* might have a variety of meanings. Thankfully, upon closer examination, the very richness of its context points us in a clear direction.

## The Context of History

The Westminster Assembly was called by Parliament to write a Reformed creed as the basis of unity for a national church.<sup>2</sup> Hence, the creed’s reference to “God alone” as “Lord of the conscience” was not intended to grant license to individuals or groups within the church to determine significant matters of faith or practice on their own. The authors clarify this by stating that those who use the pretense of liberty to oppose lawful ecclesiastical power may be called to account by the church.<sup>3</sup> The confession further notes that “synods and councils” should “determine controversies of faith, and cases of conscience.”<sup>4</sup> The freedom the Westminster Confession defends is not freedom from the considered opinion of the wider church body, but freedom from human traditions that are not based squarely on the Word of God.<sup>5</sup>

By 1788 when the Synod of New York and Philadelphia included this sentence concerning freedom of the conscience in the “Historic Principles of Church Order,”<sup>6</sup> the historical context had clearly changed. The pressing issue was now religious freedom from the state.<sup>7</sup> This body was concerned primarily with the freedom of churches and associations of churches to determine their own doctrine apart from state control. Hence the “rights of private judgment” asserted were immediately interpreted in these words: “We do not even wish to see any religious constitution aided by the civil power . . . .”<sup>8</sup>

The authors of the Westminster Confession envisioned a national creed based squarely upon the Word of God rather than spurious human traditions. The Synod of New York and Philadelphia sought a church order free from civil control. Neither argued for the right of individuals or groups within the church to pick and choose among significant “doctrines and commandments” laid down by the wider body of which they were a part either by birth or by choice.

## The Context of the *Book of Order*

The first “Principle of Church Order” in the *Book of Order* contains the statement quoted above concerning God as Lord of the conscience. The very next principle, however, adds that it is *perfectly consistent* with this freedom that “every Christian Church, or union or association of particular churches, is entitled to declare the terms of admission into its communion, and the

*qualifications of its ministers and members, as well as the whole system of its internal government which Christ hath appointed.”*<sup>9</sup> This authority does not infringe upon the rights of other church bodies, since they are also free to choose their own “terms.” It does not infringe upon the right of the individual, since she/he is free to withdraw or to join a different body.<sup>10</sup>

In addition, this same introductory section of the *Book of Order* is not silent concerning how we should resolve disputes that might arise concerning matters of importance in the life of the church. The “Historic Principles of Church Government” state that matters of controversy should “be finally decided by the collected wisdom and united voice of the whole Church.”<sup>11</sup>

## The Context of the Church Body

Reformed tradition specifically and Christian tradition in general have always allowed for freedom of the individual conscience in matters not essential to faith and practice.<sup>12</sup> But they have also affirmed that scripture is not of private interpretation<sup>13</sup> so that in controversies concerning essential matters, the private conscience must yield to the determination of the wider body.<sup>14</sup>

The current debate over ordination standards surely qualifies as a controversy about an essential matter of faith and practice. Concerning this issue, however, Christian tradition as a whole and the Reformed tradition in particular have repeatedly affirmed the position of “fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman or chastity in singleness.”<sup>15</sup> This affirmation is based squarely on scripture and has stood the test of time. Our historic polity does not teach us to resolve controversy over such long-standing and essential matters by resorting to a version of “to each his own.” To do so would be to abandon our corporate responsibility and to fall into subjectivism. The right of the individual conscience before God finds its proper place only in the wider context of the conscience of the whole church before its Lord.

## Notes on “Context”

1. PCUSA, *Book of Order 2009/2011*, G-1.0301.
2. Jack Rogers, *Presbyterian Creeds: A Guide to the Book of Confessions* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985) 154.
3. PCUSA, *The Book of Confessions 2007*, 6.110-6.111.
4. *Ibid.*, 6.174.
5. *Ibid.*, 6.108-6.109.
6. *Book of Order*, G-1.0300, n. 3.
7. In New York, the Anglican Church had only just been disestablished in 1777. See Thomas A. Askew and Peter W. Spellman, *The Churches and the American Experience* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984) 69.
8. *Book of Order*, G-1.0301b.
9. *Ibid.*, G-1.0302, italics mine.

notes continued on next page

10. Ibid., G-6.0108, n. 1.

11. Ibid., G-1.0400. In the footnote to this paragraph, it is further clarified that “appeals” here is not referring to “a case involved in judicial process,” but is used “in a general sense.” In other words, not only judicial cases, but more general matters of controversy ought to be decided by the “collected wisdom and united voice of the whole Church.”

12. Augustine notes that we may hold as “things indifferent” what is “clearly not contrary to the faith nor to sound morality” and what “does not admit of final decision by the authority of Holy Scripture.” See Augustine, Letter 54 in *The Essential Augustine*, ed. Vernon J. Bourke (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1974), 162-63.

13. 2 Peter 1:20. This is quoted in Chapter 2 of the Second Helvetic Confession in the *Book of Confessions*, 5.010.

14. *Book of Confessions*, 6.174. See also *Book of Order*, G-1.0400 and G-6.0108, n. 1. In speaking of the significance of church councils, Calvin states that “when the bishops are assembled, they can more conveniently deliberate in common what they ought to teach and in what form, lest diversity breed offence.” John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 4.9.13 (Vol. 2, p. 1176).

15. *Book of Order*, G-6.0106.

## Other Resources

### Resource Links on Topic

#### *Theology Matters Journal*

<<http://www.theologymatters.org/>>

online version in development—keep checking back

#### Presbyterians for Renewal

<<http://pfr renewal.org/>>

back issues of PFR’s annual journal *reFORM*: /store>

further links and videos: /resources/links>

/resources/audio-and-video>

#### Resources from the Presbyterian Coalition

<<http://www.presbycoalition.org/resources.cfm>>

#### Rob Gagnon

<<http://www.robagnon.net/>>

a prolific producer of mixed media resources on applicable topics

### General Resource Links

#### Book of Order / Book of Confessions online

<<http://index.pcusa.org>>

annotated, searchable version of the PCUSA Constitution

#### The Layman Online

<<http://www.layman.org/home.aspx>>

a news and information source for lay ministers in the PCUSA

#### Presbyweb | PCUSA edition of churchandworld.com

<<http://www.presbyweb.com/>>

daily PCUSA news updates, subscription required



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