

Presbyterian Quintessence: The Five ‘Heads’ of Church Government

By Frank J. Smith, Ph.D., D.D.

INTRODUCTION

Everyone enjoys a good mystery. And the story of this article revolves around a mystery, which, we are happy to report, has now been solved.

In 2007, this present author was given the assignment, as pastor of a congregation in Sheboygan County, Wisconsin, to instruct the flock with regard to church polity.¹ As we began to think about how to approach that topic, our mind turned to the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) *Book of Church Order (BCO)*,² which states: “The scriptural form of church government, which is representative or presbyterian, is comprehended under five heads: a. The Church; b. Its members; c. Its officers; d. Its courts; e. Its orders” (BCO 1–1). Here was a ready-made way of understanding this aspect of ecclesiology.

But as we began to delve more deeply into the matter, several things became apparent. One is that there had not been much thinking given to polity over the last several decades, with the result that many of the concepts that were historically employed were no longer fully understood or appreciated. Another is that the description of the Church by means of the various Biblical metaphors has not been cultivated as richly as it could have been, particularly in terms of application of those metaphors to polity. And a third observation was that this terminology of five “heads” of Biblical polity was unique, in contemporary books of church order, to the PCA—which led us to wonder from whence this concept had arisen, and why.

Hence the quest was on to find the answer to the mystery, as well as to develop, though in a modest way, the implications of this five-fold approach—the quintessence, as we have dubbed it, of Presbyterian polity.

As we started on this journey, we consulted numerous church polity experts, most of whom were likewise

baffled by the question—where did this concept of five “heads” come from? Conversations with high officials (retired and active) of the Presbyterian Church (USA) and with polity experts from more conservative denominations finally narrowed the matter down to this: the PCA, which had separated from the Presbyterian Church in the United States (or Southern Presbyterian Church), had adopted the language of the Southern tradition. But why Southern Presbyterianism? Why is this terminology not used in the other Presbyterian traditions? When was this terminology first adopted, and what prompted the Southerners to employ it?

But before we answer these questions, perhaps it is good for us to step back for a few moments and reflect on why the matter is important in the first place. Is this merely an esoteric question?

We suggest that this matter of church polity is more than merely academic, but is of great importance. This is true not only because Jesus Christ reigns over His church as king, but also because of the fact that the church is so integral a part of the life of the believer. And it has often been the case that matters of polity have intertwined with the more foundational building blocks of theology properly considered, in both the more pristine times of church history, and the times when apostasy has

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1. We would like to thank Reformation Presbyterian Church, not only for its patience in receiving our instruction, but also for assisting us in thinking through the implications of the five heads of church polity and in suggesting some of the thoughts represented in this paper. Appreciation is also hereby expressed to several churchmen, including Wayne Sparkman, Dr. David C. Lachman, Vaughn Hathaway, Dr. C. N. Willborn, and Dr. Jack Maddex, for taking the time out of their busy schedules to read the manuscript and give insightful suggestions.

2. *The Book of Church Order of the Presbyterian Church in America, Sixth Edition* (Lawrenceville, Ga.: The Office of the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America, 2003).

gained the upper hand in the institutional church. Having a good grasp of church polity, therefore, is of prime significance for the blessedness of God's people and in ascertaining how to avoid doctrinal pitfalls.

I. WHAT COMES UNDER EACH HEAD

A. The Church

The first head is that of the Church itself. In this category, we properly consider the distinction between the visible and the invisible Church.

There has been confusion in contemporary Reformed theology through the failure of certain churchmen to differentiate between the Church visible and invisible. But the Bible gives warrant for this distinction.

Christ Jesus has established His Church. In the ultimate sense, His people are the elect who were chosen by God the Father from before time began, were redeemed by the blood of Christ at Calvary, and were regenerated by the Holy Spirit in the application of redemption. This Church, though invisible to us, is visible to God; and, properly speaking, is that which is heir to all the promises.

There is a visible expression of this kingdom of Christ, which is the Church as it exists in this world. The Church consists of all those who make profession of faith along with their children.

However, not everyone who is a member of the visible Church is truly a believer. Or, to use a common Scriptural metaphor, "For they are not all Israel who are of Israel" (Romans 9:6). Over and over again, the Bible speaks of "the remnant" as a way of reminding us of the danger of hypocrisy, and of the fact that at least some who have the correct outward pedigree have not closed with Christ.

This consideration of the Church as such, then, is the foundational doctrine of Biblical polity. Without a proper understanding of the nature of the Church, all of the detailed discussion of polity will be virtually meaningless.

Before we pass on to the other four "heads" of polity, it is good for us to contemplate the various facets of the Church that are brought out by means of various metaphors of Scripture. The PCA BCO alludes in the Preface to two of these: Christ's "body" and His kingdom.

The most common Scriptural metaphor to speak of the Church is that of the "body of Christ." Chief among the relevant passages are 1 Corinthians 12:12–31 (the various gifts given to the body); Ephesians 5:30 (in the passage where Paul compares the Church to a bride); and Colossians 1:18.

The notion of the Church as a kingdom is brought out in numerous texts, including these: Ephesians 1:10, 22–23; 4:8ff; Matthew 13:47; and Isaiah 9:7.

But there are other metaphors which richly describe the Church. The Church is the bride of Christ (Ephesians 5:22–33; Psalm 45:10ff). The Church is the new Israel (Galatians 6:16 [cp. 3:29]; Romans 2:28–29; Philippians 3:3; Ephesians 2:11–16). The Church is a building (1 Corinthians 3:9–15), as well as a temple (2 Corinthians 6:16; Ephesians 2:19–22) and God's house (Hebrews 3:3–6). It is also the pillar and foundation of the truth (1 Timothy 3:15). The Church consists of branches that are rooted in Christ (John 15:1–8), and is itself an olive tree (Romans 11:17–24) and a field of crops (1 Corinthians 3:6–9). The Church is the people of God (Psalm 50:4–7; 81:8; 66:8; 100:3; 125:2; 149); as well as constituting a family (Ephesians 3:14–15; 2 Corinthians 6:18). It is a flock (Psalm 28:8–9; 77:20; 78:52–55, 70–72; 80:1–3; 95:7) as well as an army (Numbers 1:45–46; 2:1ff). The Church consists of servants (Psalm 119:121–128, 176; 123:2–4; 134; 135:1–3; 143:1–2), who can be called a "worm of Jacob" (Isaiah 41:10–21).

Throughout this article, we will maintain that this metaphorical language tells us something not only about the nature of the Church in general, but also about its polity in particular.

B. The Members

The next category is that of the members. How does one get to be a member of the Church?

Although we are members of the Church invisible, polity, by definition, deals with the Church visible—the Church as we see it expressed in time and space. And the members of the Church visible are those who profess the true faith along with their children.

Notice that the standard definition does not indicate faith, but rather a profession of faith. The officers to whom Christ has given the keys of the kingdom cannot read the heart—only God can. Therefore, the standard for admission of adults into Christ's visible kingdom is a credible profession of faith. There are at least four elements of this profession so that it can be regarded as believable.

First, it must be with words: Romans 10:9 says, "That if thou wilt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus." Secondly, deeds must follow, in order to validate the profession (Luke 19:8–10; Acts 19:18–20; Ephesians 2:8–10). Thirdly, profession is not a private affair, but is corporate and public (Psalm 107:2f, 32; Acts 2:47; Ephesians 2:13–22). Fourthly, that which is professed

must be the true faith (Jude 3; Acts 20:28–31; Revelation 2:5, 16; 3:16).

The children of those who profess the faith are also members of the visible Church (Genesis 17; Acts 2; 1 Corinthians 7:14; Matthew 19:13–14). This truth, of course, has implications for infant baptism: these children are to be baptized because they are members of the covenant and have a right to the sign of the covenant, which is baptism.

But there is much more to be discovered. Notice how the metaphors for the Church apply to the concept of membership.

The Church is the body of Christ—which implies an organic connection among the various members. The members of the Church are to enjoy a profound and warm fellowship with one another. They belong to one another.

The Church is the kingdom of Christ—made up of a willing people who follow Jesus (Psalm 110).

As the bride of Christ, we submit to King Jesus—He is our Head, and He commands how the Church is to operate. There is also a relationship of love between Christ and His Church. Further, this metaphor implies the notion of royalty—marrying the King means that we are the royal bride (Psalm 45).

As the new Israel, the Church consists of a new ethnicity, as people from various races and backgrounds constitute it.

As a building, the Church has a definite structure which the Chief Architect has set in place. As a temple, the Church is a place of God's dwelling, made up of a people designed to be inhabited by Him and to worship Him. As God's house, the Church is God's own possession. Although the Church consists of people, the fact is that truth is paramount in the Church, which is the pillar and foundation of the truth.

Christ is the vine, and the followers of Christ are branches. With this metaphor, we are taught the organic connection between Christ and His people, as well as the necessity of internal growth and the fact that the Church spreads like a vine. The picture of an olive tree also underscores the organic nature of the Church, as well as its spread throughout the world and its universality (Jew and Gentile alike being incorporated). The field of crops portrays the personal and corporate growth of the members.

The Church is the people of God—we belong to Him. The Church is the family of God—we're all related, through our heavenly Father and elder Brother. And sometimes, among the members of the Church, we have family squabbles.

As the flock of God, there is a preciousness to all of the sheep—exemplified by Jesus' parable of the Good Shepherd who would leave the ninety and nine to find the one lost sheep. As His sheep, we are led into green pastures and fed (Psalm 23). As an army, we are geared for battle. And our being the Church militant is seen by our living in tents ("tabernacles"), which point to our moveable and military estate.

We are servants—we're all unworthy and unprofitable to be part of His Church. And we confess that we are the worm of Jacob—a reality that must always lead us to humility in our dealings with one another.

C. Her Officers

In the Old Testament, priest, prophet, and elder were the ecclesiastical officers. In the New Testament economy, new offices were instituted: apostle, evangelist, and deacon, with prophet and elder continuing.

We know from history that the post-apostolic system, in which Church rulers enjoyed parity with one another, was replaced as hierarchical bishops—particularly the Bishop of Rome—increasingly came to exercise power over others. Even before the Medieval period, there was a full-blown hierarchical system, featuring pope, cardinal, archbishop, bishop, and priest.

The Calvinistic branch of the Reformation rejected that hierarchical scheme. Four offices were generally recognized: pastor; doctor (teacher); elder; and deacon. Several factors come into play here. One is the revival of "lay leaders" (i.e., non-ministers who exercise significant office, viz., elder and deacon). Another is that there is no special priesthood (i.e., the Protestants taught the priesthood of all believers). And a third is that there was no lording of one pastor or minister over others.

In American Presbyterianism, the office of "doctor" has been enfolded into that of the "teaching elder" (another name for a minister or pastor), resulting in a "three-office" position (minister, elder, deacon). There has also been a strong move toward a "two-office" view, in which teaching elder and ruling elder are seen as equal. Sometimes this has taken the form of a radical two-office position, in which there is no distinction between minister and elder with respect to function. But most often, what has been dubbed the "two-and-a-half office" view has been adopted, in which teaching elder and ruling elder are part of the same "genus" of elder, but are distinguished as two different "species"—a distinction which entails both the qualifications for office and the functions thereof. The impetus for the two-office perspective comes from Biblical passages such as Titus

1:5–7, in which a bishop is another name for an elder; and Philippians 1:1, where Paul identifies only two offices, viz., elder and deacon.

Elders in general have the responsibilities of feeding the flock (Acts 20:17, 28), of watching over the flock (1 Peter 5:1–3), and of shepherding the flock (Jeremiah 10:21; 12:10; 17:16; 22:22; 23:1; Ephesians 4:11). The teaching elder, with respect to his role as a pastor, is to engage in these duties: (1) pray with and for his flock (Acts 6:2–4; 20:36); (2) read the Scriptures publicly (Deuteronomy 31:9–11; Nehemiah 8:1–3, 13; Isaiah 66:21; Matthew 23:34); (3) feed the flock via preaching (1 Timothy 3:2; 2 Timothy 3:16f; Titus 1:9); (4) catechize (Hebrew 5:12); (5) administer the sacraments (Matthew 28:19–20; 1 Corinthians 4:1–2; 10:16; 11:23–25); (6) bless the people (Numbers 6:24–26; Isaiah 66:21); (7) oversee the church's work, including care of the poor (Acts 11:30; Galatians 2:9–10); and (8) serve as “first among equals” (*primus inter pares*) in administration, especially with respect to the moderating of a Session meeting. The principle enunciated in Romans 12:6–8, of differing roles for different people, means that some ministers will have a special role as teacher or professor or “doctor” (2 Timothy 2:2), and some will have a special assignment as evangelist or missionary.

The special role for the ruling elder is that of being a church governor (1 Corinthians 12:28f). With the teaching elders, ruling elders turn the keys of the kingdom (Matthew 16:17ff; 18:17f).

The role of deacon concerns, first of all, a ministry of mercy (Acts 6:1–4), and, by extension, taking care in general of the physical needs of the church.

Only those who are qualified are suitable for office. Various moral qualities are set forth in 1 Timothy 3:1ff and Titus 1:5ff. For an elder, it must be someone who is apt to teach. In all cases, it must be a man (cf. 1 Timothy 2:11–15; 1 Corinthians 14:34f).

D. Her Courts

Many people wonder why Presbyterians invariably refer to sessions, presbyteries, synods, and general assemblies as “courts.” What exactly, then, is a “court”?

In the minds of many people, the first thing they think of when hearing the term “court” is that of judicial process. Of course, courts do have responsibility with regard to judicial matters. A court tries cases, where evidence is presented and a judgment rendered. Ecclesiastically, this judicial activity entails turning the keys of the kingdom (Matthew 16:18–19; 18:15–18).

But the scope of church courts is far broader than the

trying of cases and adjudication of charges. As a matter of fact, this judicial aspect of a church court is not the primary function of a court.

In the first place, a court of the Church is the kingly court of the Lord of the Church, Jesus Christ: all else is subsumed under this—the judicial aspect is but a part and not the primary part.

The first object is to see that the Lord's will be done on earth as it is in heaven, so far as is possible here on earth, in and by the Church. This first aspect concerns God's worship, ensuring that we worship Him as He would be worshipped—that is, the proper elements of worship, especially the preaching of the word and the administration of the sacraments.

A meeting of a court is also for discussing and deciding matters of common concern—for example, missions home and abroad; mutual encouragement, support and oversight; and ethical matters concerning the wider community (such as the sin of abortion).

Even apart from trials and discipline cases, a court is indeed a judicatory—i.e., it declares the will of the Sovereign, rather than being a legislative body. It is a meeting of the elders who exercise authority in the courts of the Lord—i.e., with a conscious (and conscientious) awareness of the One in whose presence they have assembled.

So many people today tend to think of the Church as “their” church and not that of the Lord Jesus. Thus from first to last, many have their own ends in view. As a result, worship turns largely into entertainment; the work of the Church becomes subject to pragmatic concerns rather than the Word of God; and judicial remedy is sought for protecting or rewarding one's friends and the more powerful, on the one hand, and taking revenge on one's enemies or opponents, on the other. But whenever a court acts in these ways, it obviously has abandoned what is meant by being a genuine court in the Lord's house.

What does a court do? Fundamentally, it discerns the truth of a situation in light of the facts and the Word of God, and makes pronouncements in accordance with its determination.

How does it operate? First of all, it should operate in a representative fashion—that is to say, in republican rather than democratic fashion, decisions are made by elders who have the responsibility to make such decisions on behalf of the whole. Secondly, however, the way in which said decisions are made must respect the Body as a whole: elders are not to lord over the flock, but tenderly guide them to a proper understanding as to what verdicts are meted out and why. Thirdly, the court

operates in the name of the Lord and power of the Holy Spirit—therefore, its meetings and deliberations must be bathed in prayer. Fourthly, the court must proceed in an orderly, and predictable, way, rather than according to arbitrary standards. Fifthly, the court must operate in a transparent way: it is, after all, a court—a place of jurisprudence, in which the society as a whole has great interest. And sixthly, it must act in a just manner, reflecting the equity of the Great Judge of all.

In a Presbyterian system, there are different grades or levels of courts, from the session up to a synod or general assembly. What, then, are the particular functions of a church court?

First, we would note that every court has the same inherent authority and is of the same nature. Theoretically, therefore, the same types of actions may be performed by the courts of any level.

Secondly, however, it is expedient for there to be a division of labor, according to church rules. Specifically, within Presbyterianism as a general rule, the following division of labor is observed.

At the local or sessional level, the court, in general, has care of and authority over the local church. The session admits members to the church, and exercises discipline over members of the church. It examines and ordains ruling elders and deacons. It calls congregational meetings. It also adopts the budget of the congregation (though usually with input from the deacons).

At the regional level, the presbytery has care of and authority over a district, comprised of ministers and churches. As such, it ordains and receives ministers, and exercises discipline over them. It plants, organizes, and receives churches. It exercises authority over the sessions within its jurisdiction, and does so in four “modes”: review and control (usually by means of review of sessional minutes); reference (a request from the lower court for answer to a difficult issue, or for assumption of judicial process); appeal (a formal review of a guilty verdict, initiated by one convicted of sin by a session); and complaint (a formal complaint against any action by the lower court). A presbytery also may send out missionaries (although usually this power is exercised only at the regional level, as in church planters and evangelists, rather than on a “foreign field”).

At the national level, a synod or general assembly has care of and authority over the church as a whole; exercises authority over the Presbyteries; and can send out missionaries (particularly into foreign fields).

At this point, it is important to note the significant difference between several and joint power. The elders have authority that they exercise individually (i.e., in

their “several” capacity), such as preaching, teaching, counseling, and so forth. However, there are some matters which they may exercise only in the courts of the Church. Among these are control over lower courts, and the carrying out of ecclesiastical discipline.

Much confusion exists today because of not making this crucial distinction between several and joint authority, particularly with respect to discipline. It is true that an elder or group of elders may privately rebuke an erring brother or sister; however, that private discipline may not become a turning of the keys of the kingdom apart from proper judicial process, including, either a trial or a confession of sin, with the outcome (and usually the procedure itself) being public.

Discipline is important, but in the appropriate sequence. Initially, discipline involves instruction and training. It becomes remedial and corrective as necessary and then only so far as necessary. Judicial remedy is a last resort and quite a serious matter in church courts, at whatever level (local, regional, or higher).

Following the pattern we’ve used with respect to previous “heads,” how does the notion of church courts relate to the metaphors for the Church?

First, consider the concept of the Body. It is courts that act like the skeleton in giving structure to the Body. Furthermore, we see again the organic concept: courts properly operate in a context of body life, rather than autonomously.

The Church is Christ’s kingdom—but His rule is mediate, as He exercises His control through courts.

As bride, the Church is to submit to Christ’s courts. At the same time, those who rule in courts are to do so out of love and respect for the Church, not lording it over her.

The Church consists of branches—again, we recognize the organic notion, rather than a mechanical one, of the relationship of courts to the Church as a whole. Moreover, courts should provide shade and protection to the members of the Church, rather than simply being concerned with a finding of guilt. However, the figure of a vine teaches us that the Church visible does engage in work of purging and pruning—actions which reflect the ultimate realities of the Church invisible and the differentiation between the elect and the reprobate.

The Church is a temple—and Christ, upon whom the temple is built, has given the keys to the door to be exercised by the church governors. A temple is a place of worship—and these rulers themselves engage in worship and encourage worship among the people and in families. The Church is the pillar and foundation of

the truth—a reminder that truth is foundational for a court's proceedings.

The Church is the flock of God—and when courts make decisions, they should do so in the spirit of never wanting to leave any of the sheep behind. Indeed, even in their joint capacity, elders should be shepherding the flock.

And the Church is known as the worm of Jacob. This is a reminder that humility is essential and arrogance is unacceptable: truths that church courts need constantly to keep in mind.

E. Her Orders

When we speak of the “orders” of the Church, we usually think of the process by which a person is ordained. However, the notion of “orders” is grounded more generally in the idea of vocation, or calling.

The *PCA Book of Church Order* says that “Ordinary vocation to office in the Church is the calling of God by the Spirit, through the inward testimony of a good conscience, the manifest approbation of God’s people, and the concurring judgment of a lawful court of the Church” (*BCO* 16–1). The Bible embraces a representative principle with respect to officers: “The government of the Church is by officers gifted to represent Christ, and the right of God’s people to recognize by election to office those so gifted is inalienable. Therefore no man can be placed over a church in any office without the election, or at least the consent of that church” (*BCO* 16–2). Finally, a person must be equipped for office: “Upon those whom God calls to bear office in His Church He bestows suitable gifts for the discharge of their various duties. And it is indispensable that, besides possessing the necessary gifts and abilities, natural and acquired, every one admitted to an office should be sound in the faith, and his life be according to godliness. Wherefore every candidate for office is to be approved by the church by which he is to be ordained” (*BCO* 16–3).

Out of the doctrine of vocation comes the doctrine of ordination. “Those who have been called to office in the Church are to be inducted by the ordination of a court” (*BCO* 17–1). “Ordination is the authoritative admission of one duly called to an office in the Church of God, accompanied with prayer and the laying on of hands, to which it is proper to add the giving of the right hand of fellowship” (*BCO* 17–2). “As every ecclesiastical office, according to the Scriptures, is a special charge, no man shall be ordained unless it be to the performance of a definite work” (*BCO* 17–3).

In the Presbyterian Church in America, a man seeking to be ordained to the ministry must first become a candidate, and then undergo an internship for at least one year (*BCO* 18 and 19). It is expected that a candidate for the ministry will be a college graduate, and either have a seminary diploma or a certificate of having completed a theological study program; a waiver for these educational requirements requires a three-fourths vote of the Presbytery. *BCO* 21 specifies the process:

Trials for ordination shall consist of:

a. A careful examination as to:

1. his acquaintance with experiential religion, especially his personal character and family management (based on the qualifications set out in 1 Timothy 3:1–7, and Titus 1:6–9),
2. his knowledge of the Greek and Hebrew languages,
3. Bible content,
4. theology,
5. the Sacraments,
6. Church history,
7. the history of the Presbyterian Church in America, and
8. the principles and rules of the government and discipline of the church.

A Presbytery may accept a seminary degree which includes study in the original languages in lieu of an oral examination in the original languages.

b. He shall prepare a thesis on some theological topic assigned by Presbytery.

c. The candidate shall prepare an exegesis on an assigned portion of Scripture, requiring the use of the original language or languages.

d. He shall further be required to preach a sermon before the Presbytery or committee thereof, upon three-fourths (3/4) vote.

No Presbytery shall omit any of these parts of trial for ordination except in extraordinary cases, and then only with three-fourths (3/4) approval of Presbytery.

While the prescribed course for ordination may seem daunting, it is borne out of a desire to keep the standards high and to preserve the Church from corruption that can come from ill-prepared officers. All manifestations of the bride must strive to keep her skirts clean,

by ensuring, as much as possible, that those who would turn the keys in Christ's kingdom and God's house are well-trained and suited to the task.³

II. THE INTERRELATIONSHIP AMONG THE FIVE HEADS

As we have mentioned previously in this article, it is only the Southern Presbyterian tradition that sets forth church polity under five "heads." Many of the concepts and provisions in Southern Presbyterianism are found in other Presbyterian streams, but they are not arranged in this distinct way.

Particularly fascinating about this schema is that it helps to relate various aspects of polity to one another. Indeed, each of the heads serves as a foundation for the next one in line.

For instance, the notion of the Church as such must, of necessity, come first. It seems so very obvious, doesn't it? And yet, by means of speaking of five heads of church polity, that truth takes on fresh significance. It emphasizes the fact that church polity must not be understood apart from the life of the Body—or, in other words, polity is not an abstraction.

Another aspect of how each category builds on the previous one is that "the people" come before "the officers." This, it seems to us, reflects an important reality—that the Church is a commonwealth, and that the officers are servants not only of Christ, but secondarily, of the people as well.⁴

From the officers—particularly the ruling and teaching officers—come the courts, which is the fourth head of church polity. It is the courts who do the ordaining of officers, and ensure orderliness in church business—hence the fifth head, which is that of "the orders."

We are not the first to take notice of this natural progression. Toward the close of the nineteenth century, Franklin Pierce Ramsay observed that "the doctrine concerning this scriptural form of government [i.e., Presbyterian polity] naturally falls under five heads. After telling what the Church is, it will be next in place to tell who constitute it, that is, of what members it consists. As it is governed by officers and not by the members, the next thing must be to tell what officers it has; but as these officers do not govern severally but jointly, the courts next in place; and finally, when we have the courts for admitting to office, we may learn concerning orders, or how officers are ordained. It is this exhaustive and logical treatment that the Form of Government proposes."⁵

III. WHERE AND WHY?

As we noted above, the phraseology of five heads of Biblical polity is unique today to the PCA documents. It is

3. Most Presbyterian denominations spell out in their respective Constitutions the expected qualifications for those to be ordained to office—but none more so than the Reformed Presbyterian Church General Assembly, whose *Book of Church Order* painstakingly details the expectations. For example, in addition to the usual trials for ordination (examination in the original Biblical languages, theology, English Bible, church history, apologetics/practical theology, and exegetical skill; exposition of a passage of Scripture; a theological paper; and preaching), there is also a whole section of the BCO called the Directory for Examination. This Section G prescribes 403 questions, at least two-thirds of which must be asked of the candidate, who must pass at least eighty per cent of the questions that are asked. (There are 80 questions in the Old Testament portion, 80 questions in the New Testament, 155 in Theology [which includes hermeneutics, theology, and ecclesiology and sacraments], 20 in Apologetics, 38 in Church History, and 30 in Practical Theology.) It is noted that these questions are intended as "a guideline for examination" and that other questions may also be asked (G 1:1 C). The RPCGA, which celebrates a strongly two-office position, requires ruling elders to go through the same rigorous requirements. It is expected that a teaching elder will have a three-year seminary degree (M.Div.) while a ruling elder (or church governor) will have a two-year degree (M.A.R.), or their equivalent. "All prospective elders without a proper degree shall be examined by an approved seminary of the RPCGA, to determine that their knowledge is equivalent to the degree. A written report shall be sent to the presbytery with the results and any recommendation for further study. Presbytery shall consider this information prior to ordination" (B 4:8 N). Of course, having these daunting standards for ruling elders may virtually ensure that practically no ruling elders are ordained.

4. On a related issue, some Presbyterians have maintained that it is the officers themselves, and not the people, who are the subject of ecclesiastical power. However, James Bannerman, nineteenth century Free Church of Scotland theologian and historian, wrote: "The proper and primary depository or subject of Church power is not the office-bearers exclusively, nor the whole body of believers exclusively, but both equally, although in different ways and for different purposes" (*The Church of Christ: A treatise on the nature, powers, ordinances, discipline and government of the Christian Church*, Vol. I [New York/Seoul: Westminster Publishing House, 2002] 273). James Henley Thornwell wrote that "it is nonsense to talk about the people having a *part* in the government, they have the *whole*. And so they have the whole inherent, radical, primary power of preaching and of dispensing the sacraments. All lawful acts of all lawful officers are acts of the Church, and they who hear the preacher or the Presbytery, hear the *Church*. The case is analogous to the motions of the human body. Vital power is not in the hands or the feet, it is in the whole body. But the exercise of that power, in walking or in writing, is confined to particular organs. The power is one, but its functions are manifold, and it has an organ appropriate to every function. This makes it an *organic* whole. So the Church has functions; these functions require appropriate organs; these organs are created by Christ, and the Church becomes an organic whole;" see J. H. Thornwell, "The Princeton Review and Presbyterianism" *Southern Presbyterian Review* XIII 4 (January 1861) 788. [Note: all italicization and capitalization from quoted material throughout this paper are as in the original]

5. F. P. Ramsay, *An Exposition of the Form of Government and*

not found in the books of order of any of the other conservative Presbyterian churches, including those with “Northern” roots (such as the Bible Presbyterian Church and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church) nor those of Covenanter and/or Seceder heritage (such as the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church and the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America). Nor is it present in the governing documents of the PC(USA): the 1983 merger between Northern and Southern branches of “mainline” Presbyterians caused the peculiarly Southern terminology to be lost.

Solving this mystery entailed going back to the writings and actions of Southern Presbyterians in the nineteenth century. An article at the very end of the antebellum period demonstrates the importance of the issue of polity. Entitled “The Divine Right of Presbyterian Church Government,” the article consisted of a lengthy review of *The Ancient Church: its History, Doctrine, Worship, and Constitution, traced for the first three hundred years*, a book by W.D. Killen, a distinguished Irish Presbyterian. The burden of the book, as well as the article, was the demonstration of *jure divino* Presbyterianism. The article set forth four heads of polity, viz., the Church herself, the officers of the Church, the courts of the Church, and the Representative system of Church government. These categories do not exactly line up with the five heads later incorporated into the Southern Presbyterian Book of Church Order; for example, instead of considering the members of the Church as a separate category, reference is made under “the Church herself” of the Church as a Christian commonwealth and of the communion of saints. Nevertheless, what we see here is a churchman beginning to think about how to structure church government in an orderly fashion under various “heads.”⁶

The early minutes of the Southern Presbyterian Church, known initially as the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America (PCCSA) and from 1865 as the Presbyterian Church in the United

States (PCUS), shed more light on the subject. In 1861, the First General Assembly declared, “in conformity with the unanimous decision of our Presbyteries, that the Confession of Faith, the Larger and Shorter Catechisms, the Form of Government, the Book of Discipline, and the Directory of Worship, which together make up the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, are the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America, only substituting the term ‘Confederate States’ for ‘United States.’”⁷

Upon motion from Dr. John S. Wilson, that same inaugural Assembly adopted a resolution, calling for a committee to recommend revising the polity. The minutes read:

Whereas, It will now become necessary, in the altered relations of our Church, shortly to publish a new edition of the Confession of Faith, with such emendations as shall conform it to the style and title of the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States; and,

Whereas, The necessity has long been felt for a revision of the Book of Discipline of the Presbyterian Church, it is highly proper that such revision should be made before another edition of the Book is printed. Therefore,

Resolved. That a committee be now appointed, to which shall be referred the work of such revision or amendments of the Form of Government and Book of Discipline, and that said committee be required to report to the next General Assembly.

The Assembly Resolved, That this committee should consist of nine members, to be appointed by the Moderator.

The following persons were placed upon this Committee: J. H. Thornwell, D.D., R. L. Dabney, D.D., B. M. Smith, D.D., J. B. Adger, D.D., and E. T. Baird, D.D. Ministers: with Ruling Elders W. P. Webb, T. C. Perrin, W. L. Mitchell, Job Johnstone.

To this Committee Judge Shepherd was afterwards added on motion of Dr. Thornwell (*Minutes*, 1861, 11-12).

The next year, Dr. Thornwell, as Chairman of the Committee on Revision of the Form of Government and Book of Discipline, sent a communication to the General Assembly, informing the court that “he had been unable to convene said Committee, owing to the disturbed state of the country, and the pressure of

the Rules of Discipline of the Presbyterian Church in the United States (Richmond, Va.: The Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1898) 12. Pastor Vaughn E. Hathaway, Jr., presently a minister in the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church, was a Constitutional expert for the Presbyterian Church in America. In a 2008 telephone conversation, he noted how the chapters of the PCA *Book of Church Order* were laid out according to the five heads.

6. John B. Adger, “The Divine Right of Presbyterian Church Government: A Review of Killen’s *Ancient Church*,” *Southern Presbyterian Review* XIII 1 (April 1860) 122–259; see especially pp. 148–159.

7. *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America: With An Appendix*, Vol. I. A.D. 1861 (Augusta, Ga.: Steam Power Press Chronicle & Sentinel, 1861) 7.

Seminary duties." The Assembly accepted this explanation, and the Committee was "requested to report to the next General Assembly."⁸ The Assembly also referred to the Committee an overture that had been presented in 1861, asking for specific provisions for amending the Constitution.⁹

Later that year, Thornwell died, and his death precluded the Committee from reporting to the 1863 Assembly. A special committee, selected to fill the vacancy caused by Thornwell's death, unanimously recommended that J. B. Adger replace his fellow South Carolinian as chairman. As constituted in 1863, ministerial members of this blue-ribbon panel were John B. Adger, R. L. Dabney, B. M. Smith, E. T. Baird, T. E. Peck, Benjamin M. Palmer, who were joined by ruling elders W. P. Webb, T. C. Perrin, William L. Mitchell, and W. P. Finley.¹⁰

Three members of the committee (B. M. Palmer, E. T. Baird, and J. B. Adger, along with the Honorable J. G. Shepherd) had been able to gather on April 27, 1864 in Charlotte.¹¹ Chairman Adger reported to the 1864 General Assembly: "The chief improvement which we flatter ourselves that we have made, is a classification of them [i.e., *General Rules of Order*] under distinct heads (suggested by a similar arrangement in Baird's Digest), by the use of which the Moderator and members of any Court may find at a glance any rule sought for." Referring to the Form of Government, he said,

This book was committed to us by specific reference at Augusta, and on subsequent occasions particular questions relative to the same were likewise referred. The committee are deeply impressed with the desirability of our possessing, as a Church, a more scientific statement of the Scripture Doctrine of Church Government than is found in our present form. The subject has been largely discussed, and the doctrine much developed in various directions since our present form was adopted, and the book is no longer fully abreast of the advanced stage of the doctrine as it is actually held amongst us (*Minutes*, 1864, 244–245).

Reading those words was, for this present author, one of those "Eureka!" moments. He quietly (but still loudly enough for one of the archivists at Columbia Theological Seminary, where he was examining these minutes, to hear him¹²) exclaimed, "Fascinating! Fascinating!" For here we find one key piece of the puzzle to help to solve the mystery.

What we discover in these words is another manifestation of the nineteenth century interest in science.

Protestants in general, and Southern Presbyterians in particular, frequently appealed to natural religion as a way of buttressing the Christian faith. Science was viewed as the handmaid of theology, and a way of helping to demonstrate the existence of God and the validity of Scripture.¹³

Of course, the Darwinian perspective would eventually undercut this relationship between science and theology. But Darwin's *Origin of Species* had been published only a few years before (1859), and its impact was not yet being felt—especially on a continent caught up in war.

8. *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America: With An Appendix*, Vol. I. A.D. 1862 (Augusta, Ga.: Steam Power Press Chronicle & Sentinel, 1862) 7.

9. *Minutes*, 1862, 17. As noted in the 1861 Minutes (p. 39), that resolution was from Dr. Francis McFarland of Lexington (Va.) Presbytery, and proposed that amending the Confession of Faith or Catechisms would require a vote of three-fourths of the Assembly and three-fourths of the two succeeding Assemblies (or a proposal by two-thirds of the Presbyteries and ratification by three-fourths of the Assembly); and that amending the Form of Government, the Book of Discipline, and the Directory of Worship would require a vote of three-fourths of the Assembly and a three-fourths of the next succeeding Assembly (or a proposal by two-thirds of the Presbyteries and ratification by a majority of the Assembly).

10. *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America: With An Appendix*, Vol. I. A.D. 1863 (Columbia, S.C.: Southern Guardian Steam-Power Press, 1863) 152.

11. *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America: With An Appendix*, Vol. I. A.D. 1864 (Columbia, S.C.: Steam Power Presses of Evans & Cogswell, 1864) 244. The Honorable W. L. Mitchell was hindered from attending because of "the government's restrictions on railroad travel;" R. L. Dabney and T. C. Perrin arrived on the last day of the committee's work (246).

12. Perhaps this is the best point at which to express appreciation to the staff at John Bulow Campbell Library at Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia, for their patience and assistance. Most of the material in this article from the nineteenth century PCUS General Assembly minutes and from the *Southern Presbyterian Review* was reproduced from the holdings of the C. Benton Kline, Jr. Special Collections and Archives at the Campbell Library.

13. Demonstrating the intertwined interest in ecclesiology and science is the list of articles for the April 1859 edition of the *Southern Presbyterian Review*. Among the articles are the following: "The Deaconship," by Rev. James B. Ramsay, of Lynchburg, Va.; "The Changes Proposed in our Book of Discipline," by Rev. R. L. Dabney; "Morphology, and its Connection with Fine Art," by Joseph LeConte, M.D., Professor of Chemistry, Mineralogy and Geology, in S. C. College; "Testimony of Modern Science to the Unity of Mankind," by J. L. Cabell, M.D., Professor of Comparative Anatomy and Physiology in the University of Virginia; "The Telluric Portion of the Cosmos," by Prof. Daniel Kirkwood, Indiana University; "Inaugural Discourse on Church History and Church Polity," by Rev. J. B. Adger, D.D., Professor of Ecclesiastical History and Church Polity, Columbia, S.C.; "The New Theological Professorship of Natural Science in Connection with Revealed Religion," by Rev. James A. Lyon, D.D., Columbus, Mississippi.

Many mainline Protestants toward the close of the nineteenth century either abandoned an interest in science or accepted evolution as a divine way of creation. But within Southern Presbyterianism, two strands developed: one which embraced the new science and consequently was willing to adopt evolution, and one which continued the old understanding of the role of (and limitations of) science.

Starting in 1861, James Woodrow was the Perkins Professor at Columbia Theological Seminary. As he wrestled in the 1870s with the alleged evidence for evolution, he gradually adopted evolutionary views. Even though in a distinct minority in the Church, this premier Southern Presbyterian evolutionist did, nevertheless, have prominent supporters. One of those supporters was none other than J. B. Adger, chairman of this committee on polity. But another member of this committee, Robert Lewis Dabney, would become one of Woodrow's staunchest opponents regarding scientific matters. These antithetical approaches would exemplify the battle over the meaning of science. But in the 1860s, the old paradigm was largely still in place.¹⁴

This commitment to the scientific enterprise led to another phenomenon, viz., that of looking at everything, including religious matters, through the prism of "science." Accordingly, Southern Presbyterian churchmen penned articles on the "science" of pastoral theology, including, among other things, a scientific evaluation of evangelism, of prayer, and of revivals.¹⁵

In his 1866 article on "The Science of Pastoral Theology," John Rice wrote:

The greatest difficulty in the way of constructing a true science of administrative theology, is that the whole subject has always been regarded as a matter of purely subjective experience. No one seems willing to learn any thing except from what he himself has felt, or from the experience of some other man, to whom he has committed the duty of doing his thinking and feeling for him.

14. This is not to say that there was total agreement even in the 1860s. Robert Lewis Dabney sparred with James Woodrow as to the relationship of natural and special revelation: see Dabney, "Geology and the Bible," *Southern Presbyterian Review* XIV 2 (July 1861) 246–274; and Woodrow, "Geology and Its Assailants," *Southern Presbyterian Review* XV 4 (April 1863) 549–568. Nevertheless, in these early days, there appeared to be concord as to the role which science should play with respect to illustrating divine truth and supporting the Church in its theological endeavor.

15. See, for example, the following: John Rice, "The Science of Pastoral Theology," *Southern Presbyterian Review* XVII 3 (November 1866) 330–341; and George D. Armstrong, "A Scientific Study of the Doctrine of Prayer," *Presbyterian Quarterly* VI (1892) 227–245.

One way of arranging the "four great departments of theological science" is by putting Exegetical Theology first, followed by Historical Theology, Didactic Theology, and Administrative Theology.

According to this classification, the first and second furnish the material of which the third is constructed, while the fourth takes the finished result, and working it over again, moulds it all into forms and formulae which render the whole system practical. Thus every truth taught in the Scriptures, illustrated in the history of the Church, and systematized by the labors of gifted and pious men, is incorporated and actually reduced to practice by the science of pastoral theology. Thus viewed, the department of administrative theology, demands more learning, profounder views, and more constructive genius, than any of the others. Whoever undertakes to teach this science, will find himself under the necessity of creating it. He must not only construct it out of the material furnished by the other three departments; he must also use up all those materials, and leave no rubbish which could not be made to fit anywhere in his building. So far as we know, the first course of this grand edifice is yet to be laid.

After writing of the other departments of theology, Rice stated that the Church is the "great central idea of administrative theology."

The science will therefore show the relation of the Church to man the sinner, and man the saint; to salvation as a present reality, to faith, repentance, and all graces; then to effectual calling, to election, to the persons of the Godhead, the Spirit, the Son, the Father. It will show the reverse process, the relations of the Church to the Father who chose, the Son who redeemed, and the Spirit who effectually calls; and so through election, redemption, calling, faith, repentance, and ever grace, we come back to the sinner saved, or the saint—the member of the Church of God. Then, as the second branch of the subject, it will be necessary to trace the relation between all that we have thus learned, to the visible organization of the Church, the form of its government, its nature and powers, its officers, courts, members, and ordinances. A true science of Church government must necessarily exhibit the correspondence between the great end for which the Church was instituted, viz., the glory of God in the salvation of men, through the work of Christ and of the Holy Spirit, and the form which, under divine direction, the Church has assumed, with all its officers and their functions.

Then the administration of the affairs of this Church, so constituted and so related to man and to God, is the business of the pastoral office, by whomsoever exercised. Pastoral theology, therefore, is the science by which the details of this administration are shown in their relations to the design of the Church, and the whole of the grand system of truth of which the Church is the pillar and ground.

The author contended that pastoral theology will “include the discussion of the functions of the officers and courts of the Church, and the time and manner of their exercise. These functions are two, teaching and ruling.... The fundamental principles of pastoral theology as a science is that every power and function of the Church must be used in accordance with the system of doctrines taught, and the end for which Christ gave his Church authority to rule. The science must show this agreement. The Church, to its minutest fibre, must be pervaded by the energy of a divine life, and this life must be supported by the truth as it is in Jesus. Orthodoxy and living piety must be inseparably blended in the manifestations of the activity of the Church. Take away the life, and the Church of course is dead; take away the truth, and she is insane. We shall then have madness first, and then death. The theology of the truth and that of the life must be coextensive.” Rice concluded by saying that the “science of administrative theology must be built up and settled as truly and strongly as our science of dogmatic theology.”

We are traveling in an unknown land, where a few pilgrims have preceded us, but no surveys have been made, no highways cast up, no land-marks established. If we have succeeded in giving ever so rude and incomplete a map of the country, it is more than we dared to hope for, perhaps more than any one will that we have accomplished. If, however, what we have written shall induce some abler mind, and more vigorous and graceful pen, to discuss this subject, which to us seems to be of transcendent importance, our utmost expectations will be realised.

In general terms, there was a desire, as expressed in this article just after the War, for a scientific approach to pastoral or administrative theology. And, as the evidence clearly shows, Southern Presbyterian leaders, in accord with that general motif, also sought to discover and observe the scientific principles of church polity.

An 1861 article by a minister from Laurens District,

South Carolina, acknowledged that the “magnitude of Church government, as an object of thought, and its consequent difficulty, to some extent accounts for the imperfection of our knowledge of this object. But we may find another reason in the nature of language—the relation of language to thought.... The languages of the Church were first Hebrew, then Greek, after that chiefly Latin, and now, with us, English. From these changes of language, and our imperfect knowledge of them, they have failed to yield us a vivid and enduring light—to give us a *science* of the Church. The twinkling and expiring sparks of thought have not sufficed to reveal the symmetry and beauty, the order, firmness, and duration of the Christian temple.”¹⁶

Interestingly, the author went on to refer to Princeton College president, James McCosh, a proponent of Scottish Common Sense Realism who would later attempt to harmonize Darwinism and Scripture. In 1855, four years prior to the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species*, McCosh had published a book entitled, *Typical Forms and Special Ends in Creation*. The 1861 article states: “We think the opinion of Presbyterians, that the form of Church government is divine, and that that form is a system of courts having judicial and executive powers, may receive confirmation from a new source. We believe that our views are in harmony with the great laws of ‘typical forms and special ends,’ so fully illustrated by McCosh. The one, ‘typical forms,’ as well as the other, ‘special ends,’ will be found in the dispensations of God *in the kingdom of His Son*, and point to a most interesting analogy between nature and revelation.” The article applied these laws this way: “God gave His people, through Moses, a form of government, which is typical to His Church now, though that form was modified, especially at the coming of Christ, to suit a grander field of operations. It would result from this that we can not now comprehend the ‘true Tabernacle’ without recurring to the Old Testament. And this harmonizes with the words of the Apostle: ‘The law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ.’ We must yet consult Moses for law and forms of government” (Hillhouse, 441–442).

The same motif of relating science and polity continued into the latter part of the nineteenth century. In 1881, J. A. Quarles employed the terms “genus” and “species” to discuss the relationship between the offices of bishop and deacon: he observed that “no species is

16. J. B. Hillhouse, “Principles of Church Government,” *Southern Presbyterian Review* XIV 3 (October 1861) 431–443; the quote is from page 432.

ever cointensive with its genus; for species must equal the genus plus the differentia.” He concluded:

The true relation between these two orders or offices is quite simple and clear. It is not that of species and genus, but of co-ordinate species of the common genus, church-officer.... Bishop and deacon are not higher

17. J. A. Quarles, “Our Church Policy—Shall it be Progress or Petrifaction?,” *Southern Presbyterian Review* XXXII 4 (October 1881) 597–628; the quotations are from pp. 613–614.

18. James Murray, “The Capacity of Presbyterianism as a Form of Government for Rapid Church Extension,” *Presbyterian Quarterly* III 3 (July 1889) 375–388; the quotations are from pp. 380 and 388.

19. This, we believe, is one of the errors manifest in the way in which a significant portion of the PCA has construed church polity: not really acknowledging the organic connection among the members and hence among the courts of the body as a whole. The impetus for rejecting an organic connection among church courts comes from a fear of higher courts being able to take over congregations and their assets, as has often happened when bureaucrats in liberal denominations seek to squelch conservative dissent or prevent ecclesiastical separation. Of necessity, however, if a relationship is not organic, then it must be mechanical—and sterile. If church courts do not relate to each other in the context of a “body,” then their relationship is only a matter of cold law, and not of love.

The apprehension over confiscation of property has caused PCA churchmen to conclude, bizarrely, that a higher court may not “act for” a lower court—even though the PCA *Book of Church Order* specifically provides that in an appeal, a higher court may “render the decision that should have been rendered” (42–9); and that in a complaint, a higher court “has power, in its discretion, to annul the whole or any part of the action of a lower court against which complaint has been made” (43–10).

In 1986, the PCA General Assembly heard a report from its Ad Interim Committee on the General Assembly. The Committee minority report, authored by Ruling Elder Bruce Ferg (an Arizona attorney) and Dr. George Knight (at the time a professor at Covenant Theological Seminary), argued that the Committee’s recommendations “are a radical deviation from American Presbyterianism, without adequate support in law, logic, or Scripture.” That minority report lost by a vote of 372–373, “with the acting moderator casting the deciding vote.” The court proceeded to adopt the Ad Interim Committee’s report, which eschewed a higher court from “taking an action on a matter over which a lower court had original jurisdiction, which action is as conclusive of the matter as if it had been made by the lower court and is similarly enforceable.” A higher court, according to the Ad Interim Committee (and the General Assembly), could “act against” a lower court by suspending some of its ecclesiastical privileges or even “dismissing it from the fellowship.” However, please note that that action might not protect a congregation that is having to deal with a rogue Session—a point made by the minority: “although the existence of power in a higher court to act for a lower one (like all power) is subject to abuse, properly exercised such power is a good thing, providing *protection*, especially for congregations.” In other words, we might say that the minority wanted the higher court to be able to act in a way that allows for the use of a scalpel rather than an ax. See *Minutes of the Fourteenth General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America* (Decatur, Ga.: Stated Clerk of the General Assembly, 1986) 102–105, 442–443. This mechanistic concept was also

and lower orders, considered as species and genus, but simply in the sense that the separate and distinct functions of the bishop are of a higher dignity than those of the deacon. As man and monkey are both species of animals, but man is the higher of the two.¹⁷

In 1889, James Murray argued that the Presbyterian form of government is Scriptural and therefore well-adapted to missions and church extension; he wrote:

Granting the premise that our polity is Scriptural, the inference is unavoidable that, in every respect, it must be such a vehicle as the church of Christ can use to the greatest possible advantage in the successful prosecution of her evangelistic work. Everywhere in nature, both animate and inanimate, a correspondence has been established by the Creator between form and function. Does this great law, which seems to pervade the heavens and the earth, break down only at its point of contact with the Christian church? Has the wisdom of God suited the means to the end even where the movements of microscopic life are involved, and contravened this broadly-marked principle of its working only where the end is one of transcendent importance, of no less moment indeed than the glory of his grace in the salvation of countless millions?

Later in the article, having appealed to nature, Murray used mechanical science to speak of Presbyterian polity:

In form and structure it is as faultless as any organization can be. It is a machine of master workmanship down to even the smallest detail, without a superfluous wheel, an unnecessary screw, or a useless lever; and if it has not been worked up the full measure of its capability, it is either because the motive power has not always been wisely and faithfully applied, or because we have too often attempted to effect with only a part of the machinery what was designed to be effected by the machinery as a whole.¹⁸

We must confess that we are not totally comfortable with this employment of a mechanical figure to speak of the Church. As a matter of fact, this particular a-Biblical metaphor might indeed be misleading in at least two ways. One, it could denigrate the organic concept of the Church that is set forth by the figure of vine and branches, or the figure of the body. Two, it could imply a mechanistic construct with respect to the relationship of the graded courts to each other.¹⁹

Nevertheless, Murray's mechanical metaphor is another illustration of how a scientific mindset contributed to the concept of polity.

Applying the Science of Polity

Southern Presbyterians employed scientific methodology and appealed to analogies between nature and revelation in dealing with church polity. But what did that mean in practical terms? In 1864, the General Assembly committee explained some of the deficiencies which they sought, by means of a scientific methodology, to rectify:

For example: the book does not contain any statement of what are the radical principles of our system, except a very imperfect one, introduced by a mere foot-note. Again, our doctrine of the Courts receives no adequate presentation, nor is anything found in the book respecting the duties in full of the different office-bearers. Again, the Evangelist does not appear in any part of the book, except in a clause appended to the chapter on Ordination and in the general references made to that important office in the chapter on Missions. Then, again, the method prescribed in the book for setting apart Ruling Elders and Deacons without the imposition of hands is clearly unscriptural; and the remarkable omission cries aloud for the consideration of the Church (*Minutes*, 1864, 245).

The committee that year asked the General Assembly "to have the opportunity of a still further revisal of their work, and of submitting it to another and a fuller meeting of their own members." Because of the extensive nature of the emendations being proposed, the committee argued "that there is no possible way of our reporting to the Assembly satisfactorily than by spreading out the documents in print before the eye, that their various parts may be deliberately considered and compared together, and the whole be compared with the present books" (*Minutes*, 1864, 245–246). Due to the War, the committee was unable to meet prior to the 1865 General Assembly, or to distribute copies among ministers and elders.²⁰ However, the next year, the whole report was adopted, which included revision of the Rules of Parliamentary Order, Canons of Discipline, and Form of Government. The committee was given "liberty to make verbal changes" in the report, and each part was "sent down as a separate overture to the Presbyteries for their adoption."²¹

WANDERING IN THE ECCLESIASTICAL WILDERNESS

But this effort at revision met with an ambiguous response. The Assembly appointed a "Committee to examine the reports of the Presbyteries concerning the Book of Order," chaired by the Rev. Dr. J.R. Wilson. This Committee examined the Presbyteries' responses to the overtures from the 1866 General Assembly with regard to "the 'Form of Government,' 'Canons of Discipline,' and 'Rules of Parliamentary Order.'" The Committee stated that thirty-five of the forty Presbyteries which responded answered "all the overtures with an unconditional negative;" four of them "with a conditional negative;" and only five adopted "the overture with reference to Rules of Parliamentary Order" and only one adopted "the whole three absolutely." It was noted that "the Presbyteries are impressed with the importance of the labors that have been performed by the Assembly's Committee on Revision, and express their desire to have the results of these labors preserved." However, the answers from the Presbyteries "also bring out the fact that there is a great diversity of opinion in the Presbyteries with respect to the changes proposed by the overtures; very few of them coinciding in the same objections or concurring in the same criticisms." Accordingly, the Assembly, following the recommendation of this Committee, voted that "it is inexpedient to continue the Committee on Revision, or to appoint another at this time." However, the Presbyteries' responses were to be "all carefully filed away, with the overtures themselves, for future reference and use;" and the Assembly expressed to the Committee on Revision "its sense of the value of their long-continued and laborious work" and offered "its thanks for what they have done in their endeavor to set forth the great principles of the Constitution of our Church."²²

Less ambitiously, the 1868 Assembly appointed a special committee to deal with "the powers of elders,

widely circulated throughout the PCA and various seminaries training future ministers in the form of a book by a couple of prominent attorneys, Ruling Elders Robert C. Cannada and W. Jack Williamson, *The Historic Polity of the PCA* (Greenville, S.C.: A Press, 1997).

20. *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States: With An Appendix*, Vol. I, A.D. 1865 (Augusta, Ga.: Printed at the Constitutionalist Job Office, 1865) 349–350.

21. *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States. With An Appendix*, Vol. II, A.D. 1866 (Columbia, S.C.: Printed at the office of the *Southern Presbyterian Review*, 1866) 37.

22. *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States. With An Appendix*, Vol. II, A.D. 1867 (Columbia, S.C.: Printed at the Office of the *Southern Presbyterian Review*, 1867) 149.

deacons, and trustees.”²³ This committee apparently morphed the next year into the Committee on the Revised Book of Church Order. The 1869 minutes state: “Resolved, That this Assembly having received the report of the Special Committee to whom was referred the ‘Book of Church Order’ for revision and amendment, hereby orders the said Book in the amended form reported by the Committee to be sent down to the Presbyteries so that they may take such action as is specified in the memorial and in the report of the Committee on the subject which was adopted by this Assembly, to wit: That they express their assent to such portions thereof as may meet their approval; and send up also to the next Assembly objections to any portions they may disapprove of; and with a request that the portions disapproved of be revised by that Assembly and sent down for the action of the Presbyteries, with a view to final action by the Assembly of 1871.”²⁴

An October 1869 article, “The Amended Form of Government,” delineated several of the issues which that author, John Archibald Smylie, had with the proposal. First, he noted that it would be prudent to consummate full organic union with the Synod of Kentucky

(which had withdrawn from the PCUSA) before taking final action on the new Form of Government. Secondly, he wanted to protect against *in thesi* statements becoming binding upon the Church—especially given the 1861 experience with the Gardiner Spring Resolutions, in which the Northern-dominated General Assembly of the PCUSA required allegiance to the Federal government in Washington, D.C. Thirdly, he argued that non-communicant members should have a vote in the election of pastors. Fourthly, he desired strong statements on almsgiving, which he viewed as voluntary but also enforceable in that failure to pay a tithe should result in loss of church privileges. (“The deacons might be, and should be, empowered in certain cases to assess the sums due or lawfully required upon the church members *pro rata*, according to each one’s list of taxable property. As the government is representative, it is therefore, theoretically, the church voluntarily taxing itself, by its own authority.”) Fifthly, this system of requiring financial support requires that “there must be in the judicatories a proper system of representation. Taxation without a proper system of representation is exceedingly objectionable. It would be improper, then, to have church courts filled up with members who represent no persons but themselves.” This is a principle which the author would apply not only to ruling elders but to ministers without charge. This is especially so, since ministers and elders are not two separate classes—a point which the author believed the proposed Form of Government did not sufficiently clarify. He also advocated the abolition of synods, as being unnecessary and expensive.²⁵

According to Jack Maddex, underlying the general opposition in the PCUS was a reluctance to adopt the “centralizing” trends embodied in Thornwell’s original understanding. “Framed by disciples of Thornwell and conditioned by the founding events of the Southern Church, the proposed *Book of Church Order* appeared to write ‘Centralization forever!’ on its Church’s banner.” However, with the defeat of the Confederacy, Southern Nationalism gave way to fears about Radical Reconstruction enforced by the Federal government. That, coupled with the experiences of the brethren in the Synods of Kentucky and Missouri who were objecting to the PCUSA Assembly’s crackdown upon themselves as ecclesiastical dissenters (and who were in the process of switching sides by joining the PCUS), swung the pendulum in the Southern Church toward the side of those who preferred a decentralized approach to church polity.²⁶

The General Assembly Committee reported in 1870,

23. *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States. With An Appendix*, Vol. II, A.D. 1868 (Columbia, S.C.: Printed at the Office of the *Southern Presbyterian Review*, 1868) 276. This committee’s membership consisted of R. L. Dabney (Va.); J. R. Wilson and W. L. Mitchell, Esq. (Ga.); J. A. Lefevre (Md.); A. W. Miller and Jesse H. Lindsay, Esq. (N.C.); and Judge J. A. Inglis (S.C.).

24. *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States. With An Appendix*, Vol. II, A.D. 1869 (Columbia, S.C.: Printed at the Office of the *Southern Presbyterian Review*, 1869) 396.

25. J. A. Smylie, “The Amended Form of Government,” *Southern Presbyterian Review* XX 4 (October 1869) 477–492. The author at the time was a minister in Milford, Texas.

26. See Jack Maddex, “Presbyterians in the South, Centralization, and the *Book of Church Order*, 1861–1879,” *American Presbyterians* 68:1 (Spring 1990) 24–45. Professor Maddex demonstrated that there was not uniformity among Southern Presbyterians with respect to polity, which led to the long, drawn-out process of adoption of the revised Book. For an example of the on-going debate even two years after the revision was finally approved, see J. A. Quarles, “Our Church Policy—Shall It be Progress or Petrification?” Quarles observed that while the “mother Church of Scotland has never had but one theology; she has had, however, two books of discipline. In this country we adopted neither of the Scottish formularies, but took the English Westminster, and modified it. Under this we had repeated, prolonged, and bitter controversies. We have revised, developed, pruned, and greatly improved it in our present Book of Church Order. But it is manifest that the thoughtful and progressive element in the Church is not yet satisfied. No one wished to change our Confession of Faith or Catechisms; but there are many who believe that we have not yet succeeded in developing and perfecting a pure scriptural Presbyterianism” (597–598).

1871, and 1872. The 1870 Assembly took note of the following responses from the various Presbyteries. Of the fifty-four Presbyteries, exactly half "may be classed together as favoring the further revision and early adoption of the Book." However, twenty "may be classed as being unfavorable to the present agitation of this subject." There were seven Presbyteries which did not respond. Thus there was "an exactly equal division of the Presbyteries, so far as the question of the present adoption of the Book is concerned." The Special Committee on the Book of Church Order moved that "In light of this fact, and in view also of the great importance of a general agreement in the change of our fundamental law, your Committee recommend that all these proposed amendments by the Presbyteries, be referred to the original Committee on Revision, to be examined and incorporated in the new Book, according to the mind of the majority in the Church as therein indicated, which, in its amended form, shall be reported to the next Assembly."²⁷

In 1871, the "Committee was continued, to prosecute the work assigned to it, and to make further report to the next Assembly."²⁸ However, that bare action masks the fact that there was drama behind it, as recounted by Dr. Adger himself.

Dr. J.R. Wilson reminded the house that the answers of the presbyteries in 1869 had been referred by that Assembly in one mass to this Committee for examination and collation. This work the Committee had been doing, and now it was proposed to cut them off in mid career. Dr. Wills thought no good would come of this work. The new book is full of crotchets which are not Presbyterian, and will damage Presbyterianism. The Church wants life rather than law. Dr. Samuel J. Baird said the principles of Presbyterian church government are found in the Scriptures; the details as found in our Constitution are of less than one century's standing, and some of these are the results of compromises of principle by various parties, involving as a consequence the emasculation of the Church's strength and energy. Moreover, our present book is adapted in its details to the small and dense population of Scotland, and not to this country; to a period one century back, and not to this age. Missions are hardly named in our book, and the Sabbath-school is utterly unknown to it. He urged moreover that the examination of the book of ministers and laymen had been of great service to the Church, and wished the Committee continued, but not restricted in their labors; but desired that they in their wisdom select such portions of their work to be reported from

time to time as it might be convenient for the Church to consider. The motion to instruct the Committee was not agreed to, and the question recurred on continuing the Committee. Mr. Cater said the oldest member of his Presbytery had pronounced that the leading principles of the new book were neither in the Scottish standards nor the Bible. The motion to continue the Committee was agreed to.

It is gratifying to note the intelligent conservatism which thus marked the Assembly's decision. Touching the actual condition of opinion throughout our presbyteries as to this revision, there was some error in the statements of some of the speakers. It is very far from being correct, that the Church has "almost unanimously rejected the Committee's work." How could that be the judgment of the Church, and yet her Assembly year after year manifest such a different estimate? In this very Assembly several men of influence exhibited the desire to put an end to this whole undertaking, yet the Assembly refused to sustain them. *First*, there was a motion for indefinite postponement of the subject, which upon discussion was withdrawn. Then, *secondly*, there was a motion to confine the Committee for the present to the Book of Discipline; and whilst that was under discussion, there was, *thirdly*, another motion to docket this business and take up what the mover thought was "much more important." But the Assembly differed with this opinion. Then, *fourthly*, the Assembly voted not to confine the Committee to the Discipline. *Fifthly*, and finally, it voted to continue the Committee without any restrictions. These proceedings of the Nashville Assembly, as well as those of Louisville and Mobile and other Assemblies, show that it must be an error to suppose that our Church is generally, not to say unanimously, unfavorable to the revision. But we have it on the very best authority, that a careful collation of the answers of presbytery to the Assembly at Louisville, which were all referred back to the original committee by that Assembly, reveals a very different state of opinion amongst the presbyteries generally from what some of the speakers in the late Assembly supposed to exist. Out of some thirty-nine presbyteries which responded to the Mobile Assembly's overture, not more than three expressed the desire to have the revision come to an end. The remainder expressed

27. *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States. With An Appendix*, Vol. II, A.D. 1870 (Columbia, S.C.: Printed at the Presbyterian Publishing House, 1870) 518-519.

28. *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States. With An Appendix*, Vol. III, A.D. 1871 (Columbia, S.C.: Printed at the Presbyterian Publishing House, 1871) 9.

themselves generally favorable to the revision, if certain changes could be made in that document. A number of the larger presbyteries went through a very minute and thorough revisal of the revision and indicated all the changes they desired; whilst nearly all the presbyteries pointed out more generally their corrections. It may not be amiss to state here, on the same authority, that there is not one captious criticism amongst the many offered, and not one which exhibits any other disposition towards the revision than to make it as perfect as possible. And further, that nine out of ten of all the changes suggested are such as the Committee of Revision must themselves unhesitatingly approve and recommend; so that, in the language of members of that Committee, the collation manifests these two things—*first*, that the revision is at least fifty per cent. the better for the work bestowed on it by the presbyteries; and, *secondly*, that there is one hundred per cent. more ground to believe now than previously to this examination of it by the presbyteries, that it is destined to be adopted by the Church. Meanwhile, it is getting to be more and more the fact, that this revision is the work not of any committee, but of the whole Church. And this, of course, is the best possible augury both for the acceptableness and the goodness of the work.²⁹

In the springtime prior to the next year's Assembly, the discussion on church polity continued in the unofficial church organs. J. A. Smylie wrote: "There is no doubt a wide dissatisfaction in our Church with its Form of Government. It is equally clear that a great variety of views exists, as to whether any, and if any, what changes should be made." Even though Southern Presbyterians "harmonise so completely on doctrinal points, the same is not true in regard to the principles of Church government." The author opined: "The Westminster Assembly endeavored to effect such a compromise as would be accepted by all parties. The result was that

many important points were left unsettled or obscure; and those professedly adopting the system have differed both in their interpretation and in their practice." He went on to write: "It would seem to be a strange fact that so many are wedded to the Book as it is, and so averse to any change. That which is confessedly an assemblage of compromises, assuredly needs to be so far changed as to be made coherent; especially do things that are undetermined and vague need to be accurately defined." The Texas pastor focused particularly on the issues surrounding the nature of the ruling elder and the issue of parity of office between minister and elder.³⁰

At the 1872 Assembly, in conjunction with the Committee report, the Rev. S.R. Wilson, D.D., offered a substitute motion that commended the "care and diligence" of the Committee but which argued that "In full view of the facts bearing upon this matter of the Revision of the Constitution of the Church, the Assembly deem it inexpedient to send down to the Presbyteries the Rules of Discipline reported by the Committee, or further to continue the agitation of this subject in the Church." The motion further resolved "That the revision of the Form of Government and Book of Discipline be indefinitely postponed, and that the Committee of Revision be, and they are hereby, discharged from the further consideration of the subject." However, this motion was voted down, 38–52. Instead, the Assembly, by a vote of 50–38, adopted a resolution by the Rev. Dr. George D. Armstrong which sent down to the Presbyteries the Book of Discipline "to be by them either adopted as it stands, or to be further criticized, and their criticisms sent up to the Assembly, as they may elect." Also in 1872, the Committee of Publication "was instructed to forward without delay one copy of the Revised Rules of Discipline to every minister, and one to every session of the Church, with a view to examination of it at the next meeting of the Presbyteries." During the Report on the Revised Book of Discipline, the Assembly decreed that the revision committee would "retain the Form of Government in their hands until they can with due care affix to it the necessary proof texts. In the meantime the Presbyteries and the ministers and elders of our Church should have the privilege, we conceive, of suggesting any further emendations which may occur to them." Meanwhile, the revision committee recommended the adoption of the revised Rules of Discipline.³¹

The 1873 Assembly met in Little Rock. John B. Adger on behalf of the Committee on Revision of the Book of Church Order sent a report, which noted that the Committee had deferred to the "expressed wishes of several of the Presbyteries, to have the Revision submitted in

29. John Bailey Adger, "The General Assembly of 1871," *Southern Presbyterian Review* XXII 4 (October 1871) 541–543.

30. J. A. Smylie, "The Presbyterate," *Southern Presbyterian Review* XXIII 3 (April 1872) 228–245; the quotations are from pp. 228–229. John Archibald Smylie's no-compromise approach is seen in a sermon on Proverbs 14:12, delivered on April 20, 1860 during his pastorate in Rosedale, Louisiana; the preacher declared: "As it is in the physical world so it is in the moral world. There are some mistakes which are radical and soul destroying in the moral world, while all mistakes injure the soul more or less."

31. *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States. With An Appendix*, Vol. III, A.D. 1872 (Columbia, S.C.: Printed at the Presbyterian Publishing House, 1872) 164–166, 172, 218–219.

portions." The report continued: "As it has become evident that a majority of the Presbyteries have declined to adopt the Revised Rules of Discipline, and as the desire of a number of them is to have your committee discharged, it seems to us proper, with a view to relieving the Assembly of any possible embarrassment in acceding to their request, that your committee should now send up to your venerable body a copy of the Revised Form, with the Presbyteries' amendments incorporated, so that the Assembly may dispose of the whole matter as it may deem best."³²

That Assembly appointed a special committee to which it referred "the answers of the Presbyteries on the revision of the Book of Discipline." That special committee reported "that out of the forty-seven Presbyteries from which reports have been received, thirty approve the work of revision, and of the revised Rules of Discipline. But, of this number, ten, on the ground of expediency, or for other reasons, decline to adopt. Of the remainder, fifteen decline to adopt; while three decline to vote either to adopt or not." Therefore, "a majority of the Presbyteries are in favor of a revision of this portion of our standards, and substantially approve of the changes proposed in the Revised Rules of Discipline. Yet, at the same time, it is evident that a majority of the Presbyteries heard from do not adopt the said Rules." Moreover, "a majority of the Presbyteries reporting to this Assembly are in favor of discontinuing the work of revision for the present," but virtually all of these "desire that the Revised Rules, with the criticisms and amendments proposed by the Presbyteries, shall be preserved in the archives of the Assembly for future reference." The special committee recommended that the Committee on Revision be commended and that its work, and the suggestions of the Presbyteries, be preserved for posterity. However, the special committee's recommendation extended not only to the Rules of Discipline, but to all of the work of the revision ("That the Book of Church Order having the amendments of Presbyteries incorporated ... be placed in the hands of the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly, to be preserved by him in the archives of the Assembly, together with the Rules of Discipline, as already provided"). The Assembly approved the report of its special committee, with the result that "the whole work of revision" was "for the present, suspended, and the Committee, entrusted with the same, discharged" (*Minutes*, 1873, 328–339). Thus the controversy over the Rules of Discipline spilled over to the revision of the Book of Church Order as a whole, delaying the implementation of the polity revisions as had been originally proposed a decade earlier.

Richmond K. Smoot, pastor in Bowling Green, Kentucky, commented on the situation:

Looking at the matter as it now stands, we cannot but express a regret that the two classes of men in the Church, the tender-footed and the profoundly indifferent, so trot together in this ecclesiastical harness as to defeat those who are deeply concerned for a better state of things in our Church touching the question of discipline. We need no better evidence of the sad and lamentable condition of the Church on this subject, than the fact that, after so long a time agitating the question, there are ten *venerable* courts of the Church which have not condescended to notice one of the most excellent, thorough, and exhaustive productions ever offered to the Church on the subject of discipline....

The Committee on Revision have reason to congratulate themselves that a majority of the whole Church has approved of their work and stand ready to make it the law of the Church; and all the more so, because the Presbyteries which adopted it are able to give a reason for the proposed changes, pointing it out in the superior excellency, beauty, and truth, of the Revised Book. Yet a source of regret is, that part of this very number are willing to yield up, or waive, the whole matter upon that which is always an uncertain ground, *expediency*,—and yield up this deep conviction, too, to those very fathers and brethren who have shown little disposition to tolerate the question, and would neither hear nor examine with any degree of patience the reasons which the advocates of the Revised Book were able and willing to give for the changes which they asked. The cry came up that they were weary of the agitation of these questions, and wanted the Church to have rest. Without having ever thoroughly considered the issues involved, they solemnly asked the Assembly and the Church to dismiss the whole subject upon the flimsy plea that such agitation would mar the peace of the Church. They seem to have forgotten that agitation is a source of purity and health quite as often as it is a disturber of the peace. They appear not to have seen that, as the ocean purifies itself by its own agitation; or the atmosphere, by its agitation, lifts the hazy fog from the valley and lets in the sunlight; and the forest tree, by the agitation of its branches, sends its roots deeper and fixes them firmer between the rocks; so the Church of God, must sometimes, by agitation, purify herself, clear up the haziness

32. *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States. With An Appendix*, Vol. III, A.D. 1873 (Richmond: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1873) 307–308.

that hangs round her discipline, and fix the soundness of her doctrine deeper in the hearts of her people.³³

However, the matter was destined to come back.³⁴ In 1876, a ruling elder from Louisville Presbytery, Mr. P. Joyes, offered this resolution, which the Assembly adopted: “In light of the increasing calls upon the General Assembly by overtures for the interpretation of the Form of Government and Book of Discipline, and the difficulty of considering properly such overtures amidst the pressure of the routine necessary business of the Church, which requires all the time—Resolved, that the Committee of Bills and Overtures be instructed to consider and report to this Assembly whether it be not expedient to refer again to the Presbyteries the Revised Book of Government and Book of Discipline.”³⁵

33. R. K. Smoot, “The General Assembly of 1873,” *Southern Presbyterian Review* XXIV 4 (October 1873) 598–600. The “Historical Preface for the Form of Government and Rules of Discipline” in the 1961 PCUS Book of Church Order blamed the delay on the “uncertainty of the times and the uncertainty of the church as to what it wanted in its polity” (*The Book of Church Order of the Presbyterian Church in the United States* [Richmond, Va.: The Board of Christian Education, 1972] 7).

34. Indeed, the discussion continued in the religious press. In “Form of Government of the Apostolic Church,” Atlanta pastor R. C. Ketchum argued for the three-fold distinction set forth in Philippians 1:1 of saints, bishops, and deacons; and also contended that Jesus’ kingship over the Church implies that He is the only law-giver in Zion. See his article in *Southern Presbyterian Review* XXIV 4 (October 1873) 471–501.

35. *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States. With An Appendix*, Vol. IV, A.D. 1876 (Richmond, Va.: Whittier & Shepperson, Printers, 1876) 239, 241. Patrick Joyes’ interest in polity matters is perhaps understandable, considering that he was at that very time involved in a dispute over church property. In 1874, the First Presbyterian Church of Louisville split. Joyes and six other elders, a majority of the Session, remained loyal to the PCUS, and eventually filed suit to recover the property then being occupied by Rev. S. R. Wilson, D.D., and a majority of the congregation. The appellate court ruled in September 1878 that the property belonged to the loyal congregation. In making the ruling, the court referred to the PCUS Form of Government, as it wrote: “Connection with and subjection to the recognized presbyterial system of government is as essential to constitute a Presbyterian congregation or church as belief in the Westminster Confession of Faith.” See W. P. D. Bush, *Reports of Selected Civil and Criminal Cases Decided in the Court of Appeals of Kentucky*. Vol. XIV (Louisville, Ky.: John P. Morton and Company, 1879) 252–283; the quotation is from p. 270. Notice one other curious fact—it was Rev. S. R. Wilson who had tried at the 1872 General Assembly to kill off further consideration of the proposed revisions because of the agitation being caused thereby in the Church, while it was one of his disenchanting elders who four years later brought the matter back by way of motion on the floor of the Assembly.

36. This presbytery was located in Indian Territory (present-day Oklahoma).

At the 1877 Assembly, the Rev. Dr. Armstrong, as chairman of a committee, reported regarding the *Book of Church Order*. Sixty of the sixty-three Presbyteries (all but “the Presbytery of Indian³⁶ and the two small Presbyteries of Central Ohio and Sao Paulo, in Brazil”) had sent in reports to the Assembly. After “a careful examination of the answers—some of them very voluminous,” the committee concluded that “outside the six or seven points proposed to be submitted to the direct vote of the Presbyteries, there is really very little difference of opinion in our Church. Nine-tenths of the amendments suggested by the Presbyteries are mere verbal amendments, affecting not the doctrine but the style of the Book.” Those amendments being submitted to the Presbyteries included the following: “restricting the right to vote in Presbytery in certain cases;” a section on Ecclesiastical Commissions; requiring examination in experimental religion as well as theology and church government for ministers being admitted to a Presbytery; a provision regarding judgment without process; the transferring “in certain circumstances” of a person from the roll of communicant members to non-communicants; and demission of the ministry. There were also new provisions regarding “Electors of Pastors,” with the Presbyteries being instructed to choose from three options: either allowing “adult persons as are regular in their attendance on the common ordinances, and who regularly contribute to the support of the Pastor in that congregation” to vote with the communicant members of the Church when electing a Pastor (but not when electing Ruling Elders or Deacons); or allowing, with regard to the election of a Pastor, for a separate vote by “non-communicating adult members of the church who are regular in their attendance on the common ordinances in that congregation, and all other persons who regularly contribute to the support of the pastor, in order to be laid before the Presbytery as a representation of their desires in the premises;” or simply providing that “All communicating members of the church, in good and regular standing, but no others, are entitled vote in the election of Pastors, Ruling Elders and Deacons.” Other amendments were proposed and adopted by the Assembly as amendments to the proposed Form of Government and Book of Discipline. These amendments to the Form of Government, among other matters, dealt with the work of the minister (e.g., “When a minister is called to labor through the press, or in any other needful work, it shall be incumbent on him to make full proof of his ministry by disseminating the Gospel for the edification of the Church”). A committee of five was authorized to “revise the language and style” of the

Revised Book “in the light of the criticisms upon those points sent up to the Assembly by the Presbyteries, and publish the same and send it down to the Presbyteries.” The five members of this committee were J. B. Adger, B. M. Palmer, George D. Armstrong, J.L. Marye, and D.C. Anderson. The Committee of Publication was directed to print and have sent to each minister and each Session a copy of the Revised Book “as soon as practicable.”³⁷

The next year, a majority and a minority report from the revision committee were presented to the General Assembly. The minority asked “that the work of revision be discontinued, and the whole subject of the Book of Church Order be indefinitely postponed.” After debate, this substitute motion was rejected on a roll call vote, 28–96. Prominent churchmen divided on the issue: voting for the minority report was R. L. Dabney; voting against it were T. E. Peck and G. D. Armstrong.

The committee report, which included a tabulation of the votes of the Presbyteries, was then discussed. Twenty-nine of the Presbyteries had approved the Revised Book as a whole, while thirty-two had voted “No.” The Committee noted that “the Revised ‘Book of Church Order’ has not been adopted, ‘as a whole,’ by the vote of a majority of the Presbyteries.” However, several of the items which had been marked as a “separate vote” had been approved. The Committee argued: “It will be recollected that the overture of the last Assembly submitting these articles for a separate vote, did not submit them as independent propositions overtured to the Presbyteries, but as ‘parts of the Book.’ By this was meant that their adoption by the Presbyteries should make them, not parts of the organic law of the Church, but parts of the Revised Book.” The Committee therefore recommended “that this Assembly declare such of them as have been adopted by the Presbyteries to be parts of the Revised Book, and direct that such of them as have failed to be adopted be stricken out of said Book.” In other words, even though the Book as a whole had been voted down in the Presbyteries, 29–32, it was judged that that vote was on the non-perfected Revised Book—a revision that now had been modified through the votes in the Presbyteries. It was this amended Revised Book that was sent down to the Presbyteries for a final vote that would make it part of the Constitution of the PCUS. This report of the Committee was approved by the Assembly, 96–20.³⁸

Revision at Last

This action set the stage for a final approval of the revised Book in 1879. At that year’s Assembly, it was noted

that forty-six of the fifty-six Presbyteries had voted in favor of the revised Book of Church Order. One Presbytery (Muhlenburg, in Kentucky) declined to vote; one Presbytery (Fayetteville, in North Carolina) had a tie vote; and eight Presbyteries—Columbia (Tennessee), Knoxville, Maryland, Mecklenburg (North Carolina), Nashville, North Alabama, Western District, and Western Texas—voted against.³⁹

As a result of this report, the PCUS General Assembly declared “that the new Book of Church Order has been adopted by a large majority of the Presbyteries, as shown in their official reports to this body; and that the said new Book of Church Order is, therefore, hereby declared to be the law of the Church.” Later in the Assembly, the court reconstituted the Revision Committee, to consist of B. M. Palmer, G. D. Armstrong, Stuart Robinson, T. E. Peck, James Woodrow, J. A. Lefevre, J. B. Adger, R. K. Smoot, Thomas Thomson, and W. W. Henry. Various papers and questions were referred to this Committee, which was “empowered to cause to be corrected any and all manifest typographical or clerical errors which they may find or have pointed out to them in the present edition.”⁴⁰

Notice several very interesting things with regard to the composition of the Revision Committee. First, it was a blue-ribbon group, consisting mostly of well-known churchmen from across the geographical and ideological spectrum. Secondly, Robert Lewis Dabney was not

37. *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States; With An Appendix*, Vol. IV, A.D. 1877 (Wilmington, N.C.: Jackson & Bell, Book and Job Printers, 1877) 423–426. One plan suggested by the Presbyteries was for the General Assembly to “call a convention, to meet at some central point, at some suitable seasons during the coming year, to perfect a Book of Church Order on the basis of the present Revised Book, to be sent down for adoption or rejection by the Presbyteries before the meeting of the next Assembly.” The committee recommended against that plan, not only because of the expense involved, but also because the Presbyteries themselves are “the proper bodies to decide such questions” (*ibid.*, 424).

38. *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States; With An Appendix*, Vol. IV, A.D. 1878 (Wilmington, N.C.: Jackson & Bell, Book and Job Printers, 1878) 636–640.

39. *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States; With An Appendix*, Vol. V, A.D. 1879 (Wilmington, N.C.: Jackson & Bell, Printers & Binders, 1879) 15–17. Of the forty-six in favor, five sent in no official returns; however, “The papers publish West Hanover [Virginia] as adopting by a vote of 16 to 9; Potosi [Missouri] by a vote of 17 to 1; Chickasaw [Mississippi] by a vote of 9 to 7; and Florida by a unanimous vote. The papers say also that Sao Paulo has adopted, and that it is to be published by them in the Portuguese language, to set forth our Church to the people of Brazil” (*ibid.*, 17).

40. *Minutes*, 1879, 54–55. The Committee was also “authorized anew by this Assembly, as was done by a previous one, to prepare a revised Directory of Worship.”

included—perhaps because of his opposition the previous year to the whole effort toward revision.⁴¹ And thirdly, with reference to the “scientific” approach, we see once again a spectrum represented. Within a very few years, Adger and Woodrow would support a new science with regard to evolution and the origins of man, while Palmer, Armstrong, and Peck would champion the historic approach and views. And yet, both sides were committed to the “science” of polity which led to the revised Book becoming part of the organic law of the Church.

The Rhyme and Reason for the Changes

As has been demonstrated above, revising the *Book of Church Order* proved to be a daunting task. However, it would appear that most of the opposition was not so much with respect to the new organization of the document or the broad sweeping principles, but a few disputed points. As a committee in 1877 observed, “outside the six or seven points proposed to be submitted to the direct vote of the Presbyteries, there is really very little difference of opinion in our Church. Nine-tenths of the amendments suggested by the Presbyteries are mere verbal amendments, affecting not the doctrine but the style of the Book.”

Assuming that assessment to be accurate, what this indicates is that there was a broad consensus to adopt the new schema—one which would “scientifically” set forth church polity. Particularly, it would be one which acknowledged the five “heads” of polity, and organized the chapters on that basis.

When one looks at the predecessor document, it is easy to see why the new approach was attractive. The 1821 Form of Government⁴² adopted by the Presbyterian Church in the USA consisted of the twenty-two chapters in Table 1.

41. In 1867, Dabney wrote to his wife: “I don[’]t want to be looked to as the exponent and defender of the new book, of which I know and care little, and which I think is all to end in Smoke,” Robert L. Dabney to Lavinia Dabney, 2 August 1867, Charles W. Dabney Papers, University of North Carolina; cited in Maddex, “Presbyterians in the South, Centralization, and the *Book of Church Order*, 1861–1879,” 42. Maddex noted that Dabney’s letter was penned after the matter became “controversial.”

42. *The Form of Government, Discipline, and the Directory for Worship, of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1840).

43. Both the draft document adopted by the 1866 Assembly (and passed down to the presbyteries in 1867) and the 1869 draft document (which included both the Form of Government and the Canon of Discipline) are found at the website for the PCA Historical Center: <http://www.pcahistory.org/bco/bibliog.html>.

TABLE 1: 1821 PCUSA FORM OF GOVERNMENT

- I. Preliminary Principles
- II. Of the Church
- III. Of the Officers of the Church
- IV. Of Bishops or Pastors
- V. Of Ruling Elders
- VI. Of Deacons
- VII. Of Ordinances in a Particular Church
- VIII. Of Church Government, and the Several Kinds of Judicatories
- IX. Of the Church Session
- X. Of the Presbytery
- XI. Of the Synod
- XII. Of the General Assembly
- XIII. Of Electing and Ordaining Ruling Elders and Deacons
- XIV. Of Licensing Candidates or Probationers to Preach the Gospel
- XV. Of the Election and Ordination of Bishops or Pastors, and Evangelists
- XVI. Of Translation, or Removing a Minister from One Charge to Another
- XVII. Of Resigning a Pastoral Charge
- XVIII. Of Missions
- XIX. Of Moderators
- XX. Of Clerks
- XXI. Of Vacant Congregations Assembling for Public Worship
- XXII. Of Commissioners to the General Assembly

Even at a glance, one can see this book’s somewhat haphazardness—jumping, for example, in one chapter from the ordinances in a particular church, to the several judicatories in the next chapter; and after considering the General Assembly in the twelfth chapter, waiting until the twenty-second chapter to deal with the commissioners to the General Assembly.

By way of contrast, the Southerners appealed to “science” in order to construct a new form of government—one which dealt with church polity in a predictable and logically progressive fashion. The outline of their 1866 draft document with seven chapters is given in Table 2.

Substance as well as Form

But there was more substantive difference here besides the broad outline of five “heads.” Understanding the changes will require a detailed comparison of the PCUSA Form of Government with the draft version adopted by the 1866 PCUS General Assembly.⁴³

TABLE 2: 1867 DRAFT PCUS FORM OF GOVERNMENT

- I. Of the Doctrine of Church Government
- II. Of the Church
 - SECTION I.—Of its King and Head
 - SECTION II.—The Church Defined
 - SECTION III.—Of the Nature and Extent of Church Power
 - SECTION IV.—Of the Congregation
- III. Of Church Members
- IV. Of Church Officers
 - SECTION I.—Of their General Classification
 - SECTION II.—Of the Teaching Elder, or Minister of the Word
 - SECTION III.—Of the Ruling Elders
 - SECTION IV.—Of the Office of Deacon
- V. Of Church Courts
 - SECTION I.—Of the Courts in General
 - SECTION II.—Of the Jurisdiction of Church Courts
 - SECTION III.—Of the Church-Session
 - SECTION IV.—Of the Presbytery
 - SECTION V.—Of the Synod
 - SECTION VI.—Of the General Assembly
 - SECTION VII.—Of Ecclesiastical Commissions
- VI. Of Church-Orders
 - SECTION I.—Of the Doctrine of Vocation
 - SECTION II.—Of the Doctrine of Ordination
 - SECTION III.—Of the Election of Church-Officers
 - SECTION IV.—Of the Ordination and Installation of Ruling Elders and Deacons, and of the Dissolution of their Official Relations
 - SECTION V.—Of the Ordination of Ministers and the Formation and Dissolution of the Pastoral Relation
 - SECTION VI.—Of the Licensure of Probationers for the Gospel Ministry
- VII. Of the Constitution of This Church

The first modification was the absence from the PCUS document of the original first chapter, consisting of the eight “preliminary principles” of American Presbyterianism which had been adopted by the Synod of New York and Philadelphia in 1788 (one year prior to the meeting of the first General Assembly).⁴⁴ Instead, the PCUS draft began with a new Chapter I, “Of the Doctrine of Church Government.”

I. It is absolutely necessary that the government of the church be exercised under some definite form. The scriptural form, which is that of presbytery, is comprehended under these five heads of doctrine, viz: 1 Of the church; 2. Of its members; 3. Of its officers; 4. Of its courts; and 5. Of its orders.

II. The Church which the Lord Jesus Christ hath erected in this world, for the gathering and perfecting of the saints, is His kingdom, and is one and the same in all ages.

III. The members of this visible church catholic are all those persons in every nation, together with their children, who make profession of the holy religion of Christ, and of submission to his laws.

IV. The officers of the church, by whom all its powers are administered, according to the Scriptures, are presbyters (or bishops) and deacons, whose officers are ordained, defined and limited by God himself. As ecclesiastical rulers, these presbyters, or elders, are of the same rank, dignity and authority; but they are divided into two classes, viz: those who both teach and rule, and those who rule only.

V. Ecclesiastical jurisdiction is never a several but always a joint power, and is committed to church-courts, consisting of presbyters of the two classes. These courts may have jurisdiction over one or many congregations; but they sustain such mutual relations as to realize the idea of the unity of the church.

VI. The ordination of officers is ordinarily by a court.

VII. Although the practical adoption of the scriptural doctrine of presbytery is necessary to the completeness of the efficiency and the perfection of the order of the church, yet it is not essential to its existence.

Right up front, the authors of this draft document wanted to make sure that there was no question as to the Southern Presbyterian commitment to Presbyterian polity. Although there are parallels to certain statements in the PCUSA Form of Government, the placement of these statements as the first chapter is telling.

But even the parallels are not synonymous. For example, Chapter VIII of the PCUSA’s Form of Government, which began, “It is absolutely necessary that the government of the church be exercised under some

44. According to Prof. Jack Maddex, the deletion of the Preliminary Principles was made at the 1866 General Assembly on motion from the floor. In his estimation, the reason for the deletion is probably because of the recognition that it was in the original Presbyterian constitution “not as a list of principles of Presbyterian polity, but as a ‘Preliminary’ list of methodological axioms a church would consider in deciding a system of polity”—a list with which many Protestants (such as Baptists and Congregationalists) could agree (email, September 21, 2009).

certain and definite form,” continued, “And we hold it to be expedient, and agreeable to Scripture and the practice of the primitive Christians, that the church be governed by congregational, presbyterial, and synodical assemblies.” At least two major differences exist between the PCUSA and PCUS formulations. One is that the PCUSA appealed first to that which is “expedient” and maintained only that its polity was “agreeable to Scripture;” while the PCUS stated that the “scriptural form . . . is that of presbytery.” The other is that the PCUSA document was vague on what it meant by “congregational, presbyterial, and synodical assemblies;” while the PCUS document would spell out what it meant by “presbytery.”

“Of the Church”

In the 1867 document, Chapter II is “Of the Church,” which was the title of Chapter II in the existing Form. However, the PCUS proposal, starting here, utilized a totally different structure to the chapters: Chapters II through VI were on each of the five “heads” of polity, and those items which fell under each chapter were styled “sections.” This systematization fit well with the “scientific” approach advocated by Adger and others. Moreover, the PCUS document began this chapter on the Church by incorporating a much lengthier statement on the kingship and headship of Jesus Christ over the Church.

Section III of Chapter II in the 1867 draft was entitled, “Of the Nature and Extent of Church Power.” No comparable section or chapter existed in the PCUSA Book. This section stated: “The power which Christ hath committed to his church vests in the whole body, the rulers and the ruled, constituting it a spiritual commonwealth; but this power is exercised by his people in the choice of those officers whom he hath appointed in his church.” Emphasis was placed on the distinction between joint and several power—a concept not specifically enunciated in the PCUSA document.

Continuing with the theme “Of the Church,” Section IV was “Of the Congregation.” The only comparable chapter in the PCUSA Form of Government was Chapter VII, “Of Ordinances in a Particular Church”—a topic which this section of the PCUS draft document also mentioned. However, there was much more material covered—including how a congregation should be organized.

45. The 1869 draft version toned down this statement just a bit, removing the clause about disciplining parents. However, the implication is still there, since it referred to neglect of this duty as constituting “sin.”

46. The 1869 version removed the reference to “the Teaching Elder.”

47. The 1869 version removed the phrase “are of the same rank.”

“Of Church Members”

Chapter III of the PCUS document, covering the second head of polity, was entitled, “Of Church Members.” Again, nothing comparable had been in the PCUSA Constitution. The first sentence of this chapter stated: “The infant seed of the faithful are federally holy, and members of the church;” and the paragraph went on to speak of their entitlement to baptism—even making the point that, “It is the bounden duty of Christian parents to present their children for baptism within a reasonable time, and should they neglect this duty they must be visited with discipline. Notwithstanding this sinful neglect of their parents, these little ones are lambs of Christ’s flock, and entitled to the pastoral oversight and religious instruction of the church, with a constant view to their embracing the covenant personally, and on arriving at years of discretion receiving the seals thereof.”⁴⁵

“Of Church Officers”

Chapter IV, “Of Church Officers,” began with a general classification. The next section was on the minister, also referred to as a teaching elder.⁴⁶ Similar to the PCUSA document, there was a list of various terms by which the minister is called in Scripture (bishop, pastor, minister, presbyter/elder, angel of the church, ambassador, evangelist, apostle/missionary, preacher, doctor/teacher, steward of the mysteries of God). Added is a paragraph on the lifestyle appropriate to the office. Other additional material includes a paragraph on the duties of his office, a paragraph on those called to be teachers either in theological schools or colleges and universities, and a paragraph on those called to be evangelists—including those “appointed to use the press in diffusing the truth, and to superintend the work of systematic evangelization.”

The section on the ruling elder made clear that “[t]hese presbyters, as ecclesiastical rulers, are of the same rank, and possess the same authority with the teaching elder.”⁴⁷ Instead of one paragraph, as found in the PCUSA standard, this draft document had four paragraphs, elaborating on the nature and duty of the office. Similarly, the one paragraph on deacons found in the PCUSA Book, was expanded to nine paragraphs (although much of this material, dealing with administration, was eliminated in the 1869 version).

“Of Church Courts”

In Chapter V, “Of Church Courts,” Section I noted that the “various assemblies, in regular subordination; such

as congregational, classical, provincial, national, and oecumenical,” are “all, nevertheless, presbyteries, inasmuch as they are lawful bodies of presbyters.” Section II, “Of the Jurisdiction of Church Courts,” contained four paragraphs—most of it new material. The first paragraph distinguished ecclesiastical power, which is “in all respects, moral or spiritual,” from civil power. The second paragraph spoke of the jurisdiction of church courts, “which is only ministerial and declarative,” as being

three-fold, technically termed the dogmatic, the diatactic and the diacritic. The first relates to the doctrines and precepts of Christ; the second to the order of the church; the third to the exercise of discipline. *First*, they can make no new laws binding the conscience, but declaratively they may frame symbols of faith to be received by all who enter into church-communion; they may bear testimony against errors in doctrine and immoralities in practice within or without the pale of the church; and ministerially may decide cases of conscience. *Secondly*, they have power, ministerially, to establish canons for the government, discipline, worship and extension of the church, which must be agreeable to the general doctrines relating thereto contained in the Scriptures; only the circumstantial details of these matters being left to be regulated by the Christian prudence and wisdom of church-officers and courts. *Thirdly*, they hold the power of the keys, and therefore the right of requiring obedience to the laws of Christ. Hence, ministerially, they admit those qualified to sealing ordinances and to their respective offices; and they exclude the disobedient and disorderly from their offices, or from sacramental privileges; but the highest censure to which their authority extends, is to cut off the contumacious and impenitent from the congregation of believers. *Moreover*, they possess all the administrative authority necessary to give effect to the other powers.

The third paragraph stated:

All church-courts are one in nature, constituted of the same elements, and possessed inherently of the same kind of rights and powers; the highest court being a mere expansion of the lowest. Yet it is according to scriptural example, and promotive of the purity and harmony of the whole church, that disputed matters of doctrine and order arising in the lower courts should be referred to the higher for decision.

The final paragraph of this section “distinctly defined” the “sphere of action of each court.”

What we see in this section, then, is a highly-developed

understanding of church power and court jurisdiction—something not found in the PCUSA Form of Government.

Sections III–VI of Chapter V detailed the rights and responsibilities of the sessions, presbyteries, synods, and general assembly. The provisions found here are similar to what was in the PCUSA Constitution.

Section VII dealt with ecclesiastical commissions. This, too, represented an addition to what had been in the PCUSA formulary.

“Of Church-Orders”

Chapter VI, “Of Church-Orders,” contained many similar provisions with regard to the process of election, examination, and ordination. However, what is noteworthy is the addition of two sections at the beginning of this chapter. Section I, “Of the Doctrine of Vocation,” spoke of the necessity of “the calling of God by the Spirit, and the inward testimony of a good conscience,” and “the manifest approbation of God’s people,” for a valid call to office. This section declared: “Since all the power which Christ hath committed to the church and vested in his people, is exercised by them in the choice of their officers; and since the government of the church is representative; the right of the election of officers by God’s people, either immediately by their own suffrages, or mediately through church courts composed of their chosen representatives, is indefeasible.” Also, God provides the appropriate gifts to those whom He has called to office. Section II, “Of the Doctrine of Ordination,” specified: “No man ought to be ordained to any office in the church, unless he is lawfully called thereto. And since every ecclesiastical office, according to the Scriptures, is a special charge, no man ought to be ordained, unless it be to the performance of a definite work lawfully belonging to some office in the church.”

Provision for Constitutional Amendment

Chapter VII formally defined the Constitution of the Church, and also prescribed methods for its amendment. “The Doctrinal Symbols may be amended on the recommendation of one general assembly, when three-fourths of the presbyteries and synods advise and consent thereto, and a succeeding general assembly shall ordain the same. But in every instance the proposed amendment must be carried in these respective courts by a vote of three-fourths of the members.” “The Book of Church Order may be amended on the recommendation of one general assembly, when a majority of the presbyteries advise and consent thereunto, and

a succeeding general assembly shall ordain the same, except that the Rules of Parliamentary Order may be amended by a majority of two successive general assemblies.”⁴⁸ Once more, we discover that the PCUSA standards contained no formal method for amending the Constitution.⁴⁹

*Embodying the “Radical Principles” of
Presbyterian Polity*

Overarching these substantive changes was a commitment to certain principles—in the words of J. B. Adger, “radical principles” of Presbyterian government, which he desired that the Church express Constitutionally. In his inaugural address as a professor of ecclesiology at Columbia Theological Seminary on October 29, 1858, Dr. Adger stated:

There is a note, p. 425 of our Book, which sets forth that the radical principles of Presbyterian Church Government and Discipline are—that the several different congregations of believers taken collectively, constitute one Church of Christ, called emphatically *the Church*; that a larger part of the Church, or a representation of it, should govern a smaller; that in like manner a representation of the whole should govern every part—that is, that a majority should govern; and consequently that appeals may be carried from lower to higher judicatories. Now, this unity of the whole church in one body which governs its several parts, and governs them by majorities, and governs by courts of appeal—these several principles certainly are among our radical principles of church government.

48. The 1869 version omitted the provision for amending the doctrinal standards.

49. That is not to say that amendments were not effected—only that there was no formal provision for doing so. Today, most Presbyterian denominations require more than a majority vote at a meeting of the highest judicatory in order to amend the Constitution or to effect merger with other denominations. For example, in the PCA, amending the confessional standards (Confession of Faith and Catechisms) requires a three-fourths vote of the General Assembly, followed by consent of three-fourths of the presbyteries, followed by ratification by a subsequent General Assembly, also by a three-fourths vote. The same vote requirements are in place with regard to full organic union; however, there is a provision for “joining and receiving” (sometimes abbreviated “J&R”), whereby a simple majority of the General Assembly and three-fourths of the presbyteries may authorize the absorption of another body by the PCA; it was this procedure that was used to effect the reception of the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod (RPCES) by the PCA in 1982.

50. J. B. Adger, “Inaugural Discourse on Church History and Church Polity,” *Southern Presbyterian Review* XII 1 (April 1859) 140, 164–166.

But they are evidently not all the principles which we hold to be fundamental.

Professor Adger then added the following principles: The Headship and Kingship of Christ; The State’s freedom of the church, and the freedom of the individual conscience; the parity of Bishops; the distinction between Bishops or Elders who teach *and* rule, and Bishops or Elders who rule *only*; the right of the people to choose their own rulers; and the right of the chosen rulers to govern the people. The churchman contended:

It is all these Divinely revealed principles of church government taken together, which, co-operating with the doctrines of a sound theology, make the Presbyterian Church what she is. It is these principles which separate her from lax, disjointed Congregationalism on the one hand, and from the tyrannical Prelacy or Popery on the other. It is these principles which set forth that beautiful system revealed in the Scriptures of a Head of the Church, who is, at the same time, one with His members—who gave them their freedom and their rights, and at the same time imposed on them duties of submission to him, and to one another, and to the whole body. It is these principles which make the Presbyterian Church so eminently conservative in her temper, and yet so able to sympathise with the spirit of the age, in respect to every kind of real and true progress and improvement. It is these principles which make her at once the supporter of good and just government, and yet a lover of true and real liberty; at once the defender of necessary, wholesome, righteous restraint, yet the advocate of freedom, regulated and enlightened. It is these principles which influence her to render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and yet to deny to Caesar the things that are God’s.⁵⁰

What we see here, less than three years prior to the crisis that would break apart the Federal Union and the Presbyterian Church, are themes which the South employed in the civil realm: an appeal to liberty in contrast to tyrannical rule, and an assertion that these principles are the way of “progress and improvement.” Also evident is the theme of the spirituality of the Church—that is, not intruding civil politics into ecclesiastical courts.

Distinction between North and South

The Mason-Dixon divide was defined by differences far more pervasive, and far more subtle, than the matter of slavery. In the realm of polity, in both Church and State, North and South had a significantly different way

of looking at things governmental. In the Presbyterian ecclesiastical realm, the distinction can be described with regard to the doctrine of the spirituality of the Church—that is, that civil political matters should not intrude onto ecclesiastical courts. Many Presbyterians in the South were inclined toward this principle, while many of their Northern brethren, as evidenced by the Gardiner Spring Resolutions in 1861 which pledged the denomination to allegiance to the Federal government in Washington, D.C., held a diverging perspective. But another difference—and a more pronounced one—is that Southern Presbyterians, in contrast to their Northern counterparts, were committed not only to the spirituality of the Church, but also to *jure divino* Presbyterianism—that is, the notion that the way that the Church conducts her business, in all its essentials, was to be determined strictly by the Word of God.

James Henley Thornwell presented this perspective in his criticism of Princeton's Charles Hodge in a January 1861 article, "Princeton Review and Presbyterianism."⁵¹ The South Carolinian professor employed two terms to distinguish his approach from that of Hodge. Thornwell wrote:

General principles are of two sorts, regulative or constitutive. Regulative principles define only ends to be aimed at, or conditions to be observed—constitutive principles determine the concrete forms in which the ends are to be realized. Regulative, express the spirit—constitutive, the form, of a government. It is a regulative principle, for example, that all governments should seek the good of their subjects; it is a constitutive principle that power should be lodged in the hands of such and such officers, and dispensed by such and such courts. Regulative principles define nothing as to the mode of their own exemplification—constitutive principles determine the elements of an actual polity.⁵²

Thornwell then applied this prescriptive principle to the question of the eldership. Toward the close of the article, Thornwell gave the summary of his evaluation of Hodge's position:

In the first place, his persistent representation of the clergy as an estate in the Church, separate and distinct from the people, and his degradation of the office of ruling elder to a lower order than that of the minister of the Word, are thoroughly *Prelatic*. To this extent, therefore, he is no Presbyterian. In the second place, his theory of the right of the people to a substantive part in the government of the Church—thus making them a second estate

in the kingdom, and ascribing to them the functions of office-bearers—savours strongly of Independency. It has no smack of Presbyterianism. In the third place, his vague notions of the relations of the Spirit to the Church, taken in connection with his celebrated essay on the idea of the Church, has a striking affinity with Quakerism. His notion of the unity of the Church, as realized through the organization of its courts, is Presbyterian. He is, therefore, a little of every thing, and not much of any thing. His true position is that of an ecclesiastical eclectic. He looks out upon all sects with the eye of a philosopher, and as he does not feel himself tied down by the authority of Scripture to any one mode of organization, as he is quite at liberty to make new officers and organs, according to the exigencies of the times, so long as they do not contradict certain regulative principles, he selects what strikes him as good from all, and casts the bad away.

He comes short of a thoroughgoing Presbyterianism—1. By maintaining that the discretion of the Church is limited only by the express prohibitions of Scripture. His motto is, whatsoever is not prohibited is lawful. The Church's motto is, whatsoever is not commanded is unlawful. 2. By making the people and the clergy two distinct estates, between whom the power of government is shared, and by whom it is jointly exercised; whereas, the Church makes the clergy to be only that portion of the people through whom she exercises the various functions of her spiritual ministry. 3. By making *two* orders of spiritual rules, the Presbyter or bishop, and the ruling elder; whereas, the Church makes only *one* order, which she distributes into two classes, the teaching and the ruling elder. 4. By making the ruling elder merely a deputy, to maintain the rights of a particular class; whereas, the Church makes him a representative, a chosen ruler, through whom she herself, and not a class, declares and executes the law of God.

51. The title found at the beginning of the article is "Princeton Review, Art. VI., July, 1860": *Southern Presbyterian Review* XIII 4 (January 1861) 757–810.

52. *Ibid.*, 767. The astute reader will realize that the term "regulative principle" was being used by Thornwell in a different way than how it was employed starting in the mid-twentieth century and continuing today. In contemporary nomenclature, "regulative principle" (especially with respect to worship) is roughly equivalent to what Thornwell referred to as the "constitutive principle." For an extensive discussion of the subject, see a two-part series by Frank J. Smith with Chris Coldwell: "The Regulative Principle of Worship: Sixty Years in Reformed Literature. Part One (1946–1999)," *The Confessional Presbyterian* 2 (2006) 89–164; and "The Regulative Principle of Worship: Sixty Years in Reformed Literature. Part Two (2000–2006)," *The Confessional Presbyterian* 3 (2007) 155–215.

5. By allowing the claim of a *jus divinum* only for regulative principles, and not for the mode of organizing the Church. 6. In order to afford freer latitude and scope for the exercise of discretion in creating new officers and courts, he absolutely repudiates the principle of inference, and denies that what is deduced from the Word of God, by good and necessary consequence, is of equal authority with its express statements. In all these points Dr. Hodge has departed from the faith of the Fathers. His doctrines in respect to them are not the doctrines of the Presbyterian Church. We have maintained no new, no peculiar, theory of Presbyterianism. We have shown that, in all the points enumerated, we are standing upon the ground occupied by the purest Presbyterian Confessors, and especially upon the ground of our own venerable standards ("Princeton Review, Art. VI., July, 1860," 807–808).

The *jure divino* perspective reflected in Thornwell's 1861 article is illustrated also in an 1860 article by John B. Adger, which, like the Thornwell piece, opposed the views of Dr. Charles Hodge with respect to the eldership.⁵³

Adger set a high and principal standard for the resolution of the controversy: "The Presbyterian system is what the Scriptures teach about Church government, which is set forth in our book." Even though "large majorities" of three General Assemblies may vote in a way contrary to that understanding, "It is not 'majorities' that are the rule of our faith, but God's word. It is not 'majorities' that we have 'solemnly covenanted' to follow in all their wrong interpretations of our constitution, but is that constitution itself, fairly and justly interpreted. An appeal will always be allowed to Presbyterians from the accidental majority of any Assembly to the constitution they have misinterpreted. This is the birthright of us all" (Adger, "Theories of the Eldership," 599).

J. B. Adger was a professor at Columbia Theological

Seminary, then located in the state capital of South Carolina. His appealing to the constitution against an erring majority mirrors the argument which his fellow South Carolinians would make just two months later, in seceding from the United States of America.⁵⁴ Of course, Adger had a higher sphere in view, viz., the kingdom of Christ, which is governed in a direct fashion by His Word: the Church's constitution, unlike the U.S. Constitution, is no mere human document.

The Ruling Eldership as a Key Factor

Professor Adger's specific focus was the eldership. The Princetonian position on ruling elders was that of representatives "speaking *the popular voice*," thus "introducing a *lay element* into our government." "Surely," Adger chides, the article in the *Princeton Repertory* "does not mean to say that popular prejudice or passion is to sway the Elder; that he is to be the organ of an individual, or of a clique, or of a mob; that he is to be directed by the will of one man, or of twenty men, or of all the crowd of men, women and children that belong the Church of which he is a Ruler, so that their voice may directly reach the Presbytery. If this be the Repertory's doctrine, do let it speak it out distinctly, that the Church and her Ruling Elders may understand! And do let it prepare a clear and thorough exposition of the rules and regulations which may be best observed by our brethren of the Eldership in the discharge of these, their new and hitherto unheard-of duties!"

But this view of ruling elders necessarily mixes in a Congregationalist element, rather than maintaining a pure Presbyterianism.

We say, the Scriptures teach, and our Fathers held, that the Lord Jesus set up His Church as an organized body, with officers appointed by Him to rule her, not according to the popular will, in any direct sense whatever, but only in the indirect and secondary sense, that they, being taken from amongst the people, would fairly consider their real and true interests. They were to do for the people, not whatever the people should wish, but what they might judge, in the fear of God, and in a paternal love for the Church, that the people *ought* to wish. Christ made no promises to the people, in a separate capacity, but all to *His Bride*, as she is an organized body, with divinely appointed officer-bearers. Churches were from the beginning, and are now, always organized with Elders over them, and the whole right of the people, as respects government, is to choose whom they will to rule them. Nor can they proceed to this choice of

53. J. B. Adger, "The Princeton Review on Theories of the Eldership," *Southern Presbyterian Review* XIII 3 (October 1860) 578–624.

54. "The people of the State of South Carolina, in Convention assembled, on the 26th day of April, A.D., 1852, declared that the frequent violations of the Constitution of the United States, by the Federal Government, and its encroachments upon the reserved rights of the States, fully justified this State in then withdrawing from the Federal Union; but in deference to the opinions and wishes of the other slaveholding States, she forbore at that time to exercise this right. Since that time, these encroachments have continued to increase, and further forbearance ceases to be a virtue." (Declaration of the Immediate Causes Which Induce and Justify the Secession of South Carolina from the Federal Union, adopted December 24, 1860).

themselves, independently of their existing rulers. They cannot do any thing, as people, apart from their office-bearers—least of all can they take men from themselves, being still mere *individuals of the people*, mere *laymen*, and *not ordained to be high spiritual office-bearers*, and send them to the Church courts, to exercise “the people’s part” of the Church government. We say, this whole doctrine of “the people’s part in the government” is un-presbyterian. Our Board of Publication has issued Dr. Hodge’s book by hundreds and by thousands, as we were told by him, but we believe that the Church will, upon examination, repudiate this, as a new and unsound addition to the system of our Fathers.⁵⁵

Besides introducing a Congregationalist element into polity, Dr. Hodge’s position also embraces “a prelatric principle. It sets up a hierarchy who exercise powers of rule in their own right, and not as representatives, or chosen Rulers of the people.” Dr. Adger understands why these prelatric or semi-prelatric views “should deny the right of Ruling Elders to lay on hands in the ordination of a Clergyman.”

Laymen, of course, can take no part in the ordination of such. Only Ministers can make a Minister—only those who have orders can communicate them to others. There is a mysterious influence which oozes out of the sacred persons of Ministers through the tips of their fingers, when they lay on their holy hands upon the head of any man, and then, in his turn, can hand down and finger down this *virus* to others after him; and thus, only, is the apostolical succession of true Presbyterian Clergymen to be preserved (Adger, “Theories of the Eldership,” 622–623)!

This article exhibits the melding of several themes into an organic whole: *jure divino* Presbyterianism, as applied particularly to the eldership; the importance of a written Constitution to delineate the doctrine and practice of polity; and the relationship between the people and Church officers so as to avoid prelatry on the one hand and a democratic Congregationalism on the other. J. B. Adger, along with other Southern churchmen like Thornwell, had reflected carefully on these issues, and the result was a major modification of the Church’s official statement on polity—including the employment of five “heads” in order to handle these matters systematically and scientifically. And what ties these five heads together is that of the organic unity of the Church, with a polity that is “representative or presbyterian.” This concept, of course, was present in the PCUSA book. But this

particular language was deliberately used in the PCUS revision and placed in a prominent position, in order to distinguish the Southern view from the Princeton perspective of Charles Hodge, in which government was an admixture between two castes: ministers, who were regarded as clergy; and ruling elders, who were regarded as mere layman.

IV. OVERVIEW

Why did the Southern Presbyterians formulate the five “heads” of church polity? Perhaps the most significant factor was the intense discussion for a decade or so concerning the nature of the church and her officers. The famed debate between James Henley Thornwell and Charles Hodge with regard to church boards was one example of the broader issue of *jure divino* versus *jure humano* polity—a disagreement which manifested itself with respect to the eldership. This controverted issue caused Southern churchmen to think more deeply with respect to church government, and further inculcated the idea that how the Church is governed is, at root, a doctrinal issue, and not one of pragmatism. Given the proclivity toward a scientific approach to theology as a whole, these churchmen naturally gravitated toward the same systematic, scientific approach to polity. And the separation from the North, ultimately in both Church and State, gave further impetus to the drive to re-formulate the *Book of Church Order*.

Think of it—in the midst of a devastating war, and then the reconstruction of society, the Southern Presbyterian Church gave considerable attention to the subject of church polity! Part of the reason for this attention was a desire to demonstrate the superiority of the Southern approach to polity, in both Church and State.

Adger’s 1860 article on “The Divine Right of Presbyterian Church Government” argued that the “representative principle” is the only protection against the dangers of democracy, monarchy, and oligarchy in the civil realm. The author continued:

Our Church government is not in the hands of the mass of the people, nor yet in the hands of individual officers whom they have appointed, but in the hands of representative assemblies chosen by the people. This is it which distinguishes it from Prelacy on the one hand,

55. Adger, “Theories of the Eldership,” 620–622. Adger’s reference to Congregationalism would have recalled to his readers the Old School–New School schism in 1837–1838, in which the Old School majority excised four synods because of their being un-Constitutionally formed as an amalgam between Presbyterians and Congregationalists.

and Congregationalism on the other. And it is worthy of special notice that in these free representative assemblies, instituted by Jesus Christ for the rule of His Church, there is provided an arrangement answering precisely to that most important check which, in the freest modern States, is imposed on their popular assemblies, viz: the principle of *two chambers*, composed of different persons, belonging to different classes or elected for different terms of service. Our courts have both Ministers and Elders, and the one class operates as a check upon the other. So, too, our higher courts are a check upon the lower. Thus is the discovery of truth promoted, and the probability diminished that party-interest or temporary prejudices shall predominate in the result (Adger, "The Divine Right of Presbyterian Church Government," 156f).

Of course, it was apprehension about the elevation of a sectional party—the Republican Party, in the person of Abraham Lincoln particularly—that led to Southern secession in 1860 and 1861. The checks and balances were perceived as no longer effective in the civil sphere, with the result that the Southern states would no longer be able to exercise their freedom and rights within the U.S. Constitution.

In his January 1861 article disputing the views of

56. Thornwell, "Princeton Review and Presbyterianism," 774. Comparing ecclesiastical and civil government has often been characteristic of Presbyterianism. In 1881, J. A. Quarles referred to a David Dudley Field, who "has thus interpreted our civil government: That the individual is free in his own individual sphere, and comes under the control of social law only in his relations to others. That the States are free and sovereign in their own sphere, and have control of all affairs that pertain in common to the entire State. That the National Government is limited, therefore, to those matters which are general and concern all the States. Whether he be right or not, this general principle prevails in the relations of our graded courts" (Quarles, "Our Presbyterian Policy—Shall It Be Progress or Petrification?," 618). In 1888, Henry M. White, in an article which sought to avoid relacy and the claims of the papacy, stated: "In a republican government, whether civil or ecclesiastical, all power resides primarily in the people" ("The Organization of Churches in Heathen Lands," *Presbyterian Quarterly* I 3 [January 1888] 476–491; the quotation is from p. 489). And in 1890, Clement Read Vaughn wrote: "To make government, and especially a free and popular representative government, synonymous with tyranny, and call it 'an oligarchy,' because it is a real government and not a sham, and asserts its own distinctive principles, is to abuse the invaluable human privilege of talking nonsense. A true and faithful government in church, or state, or family, or in any place where associated men are bound together, is the noblest of God's gifts for the welfare of mankind in a world like this. It is the most glorious image of the divine justice within the earthly sphere of human existence" (C. R. Vaughn, "Representative Government in the Church," *Presbyterian Quarterly* IV 4 [October 1890] 561–589; the quotation is from p. 589).

Charles Hodge, James Henley Thornwell argued for "the principle that whatsoever is not commanded is forbidden." He then drew this conclusion: "The Church, like the Government of the United States, is a positive institution, with positive grants of power, and whatever is not given is *withheld*."⁵⁶

Even more explicit in drawing analogies between the civil and ecclesiastical spheres is the October 1861 article, "Principles of Church Government." The author, a South Carolinian pastor, asserted: "The powers of civil government have been divided and subdivided, so as to make a complex and refined organism, according to the maxim: without division of power there is no constitution; without constitution, no liberty. This division was made by the framers of the Constitution of the United States, with an approach towards perfection, we hope, now, in our blessed Confederacy. There is a triple division of these powers—those delegated to the Confederacy; those to the State governments; and those which the people still retain, not having delegated them to either government." After a lengthy quotation of John C. Calhoun, the author argued that the system of ecclesiastical government can be simpler than that of the State, "for the officers have, substantially, but one everlasting code to which they can require obedience. This, of itself, is a mighty wall of salvation from ecclesiastical tyranny, where the people are not too ignorant or careless to perceive it" (Hillhouse, "Principles of Church Government," 438–440). The article concluded this way:

Constitutions and forms of government, in Church and State, are among the most complex and difficult, yet the most ennobling and important, objects of thought. For the subjects of a large part of history are usurpations of unjust and unconstitutional power, and consequent oppression; the subject of nearly all the other part of history is resistance to usurpation, calling into play the most godlike virtues of our nature.

And our Southern Zion is amply justified in her profound sympathy with our Confederacy in the bloody conflict for constitutional liberty. Boasting of a complete separation of Church and State, we may forget how intimate is the relation of these divine institutions, and how powerful is their mutual influence. Civil and ecclesiastical tyranny have ever been closely combined. On the other hand, constitutional liberty in the Church, tends to bring about constitutional liberty in the country. And this, in its turn, has the most happy influence upon the Church, which never flourished extensively, and for a

long period, where despotism prevailed. This conflict, then, is not merely for temporal advantages, but for the noblest opportunities for spiritual and eternal life.⁵⁷

At the same time, we should not impute mere sectional motives to the enterprise.⁵⁸ Polity was and is, intrinsically, of prime importance, and these churchmen viewed these matters as such.

Illustrative of this point is an article towards the end of the nineteenth century by Thomas Cary Johnson. This professor at Union Theological Seminary in Virginia contended for the Importance of Church Polity on several grounds: church polity has a great affect upon doctrine; it affects the carrying out of the Great Commission (evangelism and edification); it affects how the State is politically organized; God commends in Scripture only one form of church government. Indeed, "If, according to the Scriptures, church government is important then it is important." Johnson painted the issue with bold, broad strokes:

There is power in a great religious idea; the autocratic edicts of a Zeno, a Justinian, a Heraclius, fell back on themselves, and the world went on as it was carried by the idea. Even the dull Charles V., with a world-empire at his back, and Rome as his ally, felt the power of a great religious idea, though unable to understand it—felt it as he slunk away broken and cowed to his convent. Such an idea beheaded Charles I., and placed England at the feet of Cromwell. There is power even in a false religious idea, believed to be of God. The Baptist belief in *jure divino* (?) immersion as the only valid baptismal form, carries multitudes of the superficial with them. And if the Lord shall put into the minds and hearts of our people belief in the *jure divino* polity as a thing of importance, giving them also the essentials of his saving truth, and a burning desire for the full salvation of souls; then we shall see a lengthening of the cords and a strengthening of the stakes.⁵⁹

And because polity is inherently important, it should not be reduced to a sectional dispute. Adger, in his January 1861 article, "Presbyterian Authorities on Theories of the Eldership," tried to distance himself from Charles Hodge's attempt to portray "even the discussion itself, as some thing altogether 'Southern' and not 'Northern' at all." By way of contrast, Adger proved that the best Reformed authorities, from Calvin to the Scottish Church, believed that ruling elders are presbyters, rather than "lay leaders" (as maintained by Hodge). Furthermore, the American Presbyterian standards also reflected the

commitment to this precept—Hodge's view was the novelty.⁶⁰

What this demonstrates is that prominent churchmen above and below the Mason-Dixon line looked at polity differently. The North-South divide, evident even in the antebellum period and intensified by the onset of secession and war, served as a catalyst for reformulating church polity. A scientific approach provided the rational basis for how to make those changes. The science of church government, then, was put into the service of the Southern Presbyterian Church not only in establishing the categories of five "heads" of church polity, but also in incorporating into the ecclesiastical constitution a Southern accent on matters such as the importance of the ruling eldership.

New Insights into Polity

And these Southern churchmen understood that important reflection was taking place regarding polity. That is why J. B. Adger reported on the floor of the 1864 General Assembly about the desire for "a more scientific statement of the Scripture Doctrine of Church Government than is found in our present form"—one

57. Ibid., 443. Providing a secular evaluation of the different perspectives on freedom is historian James M. McPherson, who wrote that "when secessionists protested that they were acting to preserve traditional rights and values, they were correct. They fought to protect their constitutional liberties against the perceived northern threat to overthrow them. The South's concept of republicanism had not changed in three-quarters of a century; the North's had. With complete sincerity the South fought to preserve its version of the republic of the founding fathers—a government of limited powers that protected the rights of property . . ." (*Battle Cry of Freedom* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1988] 860–861).

58. Jack P. Maddex, Jr., wrote that the *Southern Presbyterian Review* was established by a group of South Carolina ministers because Charles Hodge's *Princeton Review* "was closed to the Carolinians as a forum for subjects about which they disagreed with Hodge—distinctly, church government, and subtly, the degree of divine sanction for slavery." According to Professor Maddex, although the journal narrowed in focus after the War, this was in contrast to the publication's "early catholicity." He also noted that the "intellectuals" among the Southern Presbyterians "carried on a long tradition of seeking to comprehend all knowledge within a grand ideological synthesis." See his chapter, "Southern Presbyterian Review, 1847–1885," in Ronald Lora and William Henry Longton, eds., *The Conservative Press in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century America* (Westwood, Ct.: Greenwood Press, 1999) 303–311.

59. T. C. Johnson, "The Tenet of Jure Divino Presbyterian Polity," *Presbyterian Quarterly* VII 4 (October 1893) 505–533; see especially pp. 512–521, 532–533.

60. John B. Adger, "Presbyterian Authorities on Theories of the Eldership," *Southern Presbyterian Review* XIII 4 (January 1861) 811–859. The quotation is from p. 812.

which would reflect the fact that the doctrine of polity had been “much developed in various directions since our present form was adopted, and the book is no longer fully abreast of the advanced stage of the doctrine as it is actually held amongst us.” Three years prior to that report, Adger wrote:

It will now be felt, we think, by every reader, that there is necessarily great danger in any careless appeal to past authorities about Church government—that, in fact, the doctrine is now better understood in Scotland, by the Free Church, than it ever was understood in Scotland at any previous period—that it is better understood, on some points, by American Presbyterians, than any where else in the world; and that whoever would look backwards for light on the subject, must, in the first place, *look all the way back* to the Scriptures; and secondly, in looking at any particular point of the development of the doctrine, after it was exhumed by Calvin, and began again to be received into the Church’s experience, he must always be ready to compare the positions assumed directly with God’s Word, according to the best light of his own private judgment, enlightened by God’s Spirit.⁶¹

Around the turn of the century, Robert A. Lapsley made the case that the Southern Presbyterian Church did indeed have distinctive principles—as evidenced, for example, by the difference in polity between the PCUS *Book of Church Order* and its Northern counterpart. The New Book (i.e., the PCUS Book) is almost twice as long as the Old. Besides “matters of detail,” “the enlargement of the New Book is brought about mainly by the fuller statement of important principles, some of which are not recognized at all in the Old Book, or are only obscurely hinted at there.” Because of the Westminster Assembly being composed of divines representing a mixture of polity positions, the Westminster Form of Church Government contains not just Presbyterian principles, but “Erasian, Congregational and

Prelatical elements, forced on the Assembly by the Parliament of England.”

While the Old Book thus exhibits distinct evidence of admixture from sources outside of pure Presbyterianism, our New Book is a far more accurate representation of the real ecclesiology of the Westminster Assembly. It is in fact the Presbyterianism of Ruth-erford and Gillespie, revived in the last generation by Thornwell and Breckinridge, and embodied in our new Form of Government by such ecclesiastical statesmen as Adger and Peck, and Armstrong and E. T. Baird, and Stuart Robinson, and Girardeau and Palmer.

The “divine right of Presbytery,” noted Lapsley, “rings out in the very first words of our New Book, ‘The scriptural form of church government, which is that of Presbytery’—and so throughout—and which cannot be found at all in the Old Book.” Another significant addition is that of “vital distinction as to church power”—that is, the difference between power of order (in which presbyters act severally) and power of jurisdiction (in which presbyters act jointly, in church courts). Other important distinctive points of polity include the notion of vocation (the three-fold call of a person to office, including not only the inner call but also the confirmation of that call by the church); the doctrine of ordination (specifying that it is an “act of a court made of Presbyters, formally inducting into office one who in their judgment, has been duly called of God thereunto”); a “clear demarcation of the sphere of jurisdiction of each court;” and the limitation of franchise to communicant members. But the “crowning distinction” revolved around the fact that ruling elders were recognized as presbyters on a par with ministers: “In no other statement of constitutional principles will you find a clear recognition of that great doctrine which lies at the head of the Presbyterian system, the doctrine of the parity of the eldership.”⁶²

The Doctrine of Polity

Another point of interest is the way in which each of these five “heads” of polity is regarded as a doctrinal matter. In the Westminster Assembly memorial volume in 1897, Dr. Eugene Daniel, pastor of Raleigh’s First Presbyterian Church, addressed the relationship between doctrine and ecclesiology, particularly polity and worship. He used the truth of Christ’s sovereignty to bind together these concepts: “The sovereign Jesus himself gathers his elect into the one body of which he is the

61. Ibid., 826. Adger was willing to challenge the position of the Westminster Assembly, which prescribed that “preaching presbyters” rather than “the Presbytery” (which would include ruling elders) would lay hands on ministers being ordained. “The departure of the Westminster formulary from the principle of the Second Book [of Discipline of the Church of Scotland], is, in its turn, departed from by our Constitution. Deliberately forsaking the Westminster standard, it goes back to the ground maintained in the Second Book” (857).

62. Robert A. Lapsley, “Has the Southern Presbyterian Church any Distinctive Principles?” *Presbyterian Quarterly* XV 3 (July 1901) 414–430; see especially pp. 427–429. The article is available on-line at <http://www.pcahistory.org/HCLibrary/periodicals/tpq/15-3-5.pdf>.

Head;” “the King gives his own word as the exclusive law of being, of belief, and of daily life;” “in the Scriptures given by the King to his church, he hath appointed for her ‘a government,’ in the hands of officers chosen and qualified by himself and ‘distinct from the civil magistrate;” and “As founded by our Lord and his apostles, the worship of the church partook of the simplicity of its government.”⁶³

Dr. Daniel’s piece at the end of the nineteenth century illustrates that because of the *jure divino* principle, all of ecclesiology was considered to be doctrinal. This position which characterized Southern Presbyterian polity, extended to all of the parts or elements of polity, including the five “heads.” Hence it was natural to speak of the doctrine of each of these parts.

That terminology was not immediately employed in the Form of Government. However, in the various versions of the Southern Presbyterian *Book of Church Order*, there was an evolution as to how these particular sections were titled. By the twentieth century, the nomenclature being employed was that of the “Doctrine of” each of these heads.

And yet, this belies the fact that the Book includes things that are circumstantial—a factor which undermined the notion of doctrine and precept. This reality was recognized by nineteenth century authors. In “The Divine Right of Presbyterian Church Government,” we read:

If these four heads of the doctrine of Church government be acknowledged must the whole system be acknowledged? What more is there in the system besides these four main things? There are only some circumstantials; but these also are of Divine right, because they are necessary for decency and order, and we have the Divine command to do all things decently and in order. The government is specifically of deliberative assemblies representing the Church and acting for her edification. Of course it is their right and duty to make all mere circumstantial rules, and every one of those rules has the Divine sanction, if it accord with Scripture. The courts that make them are liable to err, and the Word is always the only standard whereby everything is to be tried. But, when agreeable to Scripture, those rules, even the minutest of them, are of Divine right. They are made by an authority which the Lord Himself set up, and which acts in His name. They proceed from Rulers that have the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven, and have power to bind and to loose on earth, and it is bound or loosed accordingly in Heaven (Adger, “The Divine Right of Presbyterian Church Government,” 158).

A January 1861 article entitled “The Manner of Altering Our Doctrinal Standards” also noted the differences:

The constitution of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America consists of four parts, pertaining respectively to doctrine, government, discipline and worship. We claim that all these formularies are scriptural, and hence are binding on the consciences of those associated together in the Presbyterian Church, in Christian and ministerial communion. But we do not consider them all scriptural in the same sense, nor binding in the same degree.

The author argued that the doctrine of the Westminster Standards “we hold to be the very system of faith revealed in the Bible for man’s salvation. Hence, we require the office-bearers, but especially the authorized teachers of the Church, to receive them as the confession of their faith, adopting them, *ex animo*, in their plain and obvious sense, ‘as containing that system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures;’ and the private members, in like manner, are under obligation to receive instruction therefrom, with that docility which becomes disciples in the school of Christ.” On the other hand,

The principles and rules of our government, discipline and worship, we hold to be derived from the Bible, either from its direct and positive precepts, or by good and necessary inference therefrom. While, therefore, we claim our Church order to be *jure divino*, in the sense that all the prerogatives, the officers and the ordinances of the Church are clearly ordained in the Scriptures, we do not hold that all the details of ecclesiastical regulation are given, but that much is left, in the practical administration of the Church, to human wisdom and prudence, in subordination to the directions of the Divine word. Hence, we profess those parts of our Constitution pertaining to the order of the Church, in a very different sense from the confession we make in adopting our doctrinal formularies, since they necessarily contain, not only the principle of government,

63. Eugene Daniel, “Church Polity and Worship—Emphasizing Their Relation to Doctrine,” in Francis R. Beattie, et al., *Memorial Volume of the Westminster Assembly. 1647–1897. Containing Eleven Addresses Delivered Before the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States, at Charlotte, N.C., in May 1897. In Commemoration of the Two Hundred and Fiftieth Anniversary of the Westminster Assembly, and of the Formation of the Westminster Standards.* 3rd Edition (Richmond, Va.: The Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1897), 150–160.

discipline and worship, which the Scriptures ordain, but, also, such prudential rules and regulations as the necessities of the Church have constrained her to enact. As these are, in good part, the mere product of human wisdom, instead of receiving and adopting them as we do the system of doctrine taught in the Confession, we are simply required to declare that we “approve of the government and discipline of the Presbyterian Church.” So, also, the private member is under obligation to submit to his brethren placed over him in the Lord, in the due exercise thereof.

The article recounted that while the first American Presbyterian General Assembly in 1788 adopted the Westminster Standards largely unchanged, much greater changes were enacted with the other parts of the Constitution. However, even with the extensive modifications in the formularies dealing with government, discipline, and worship, the principles have remained the same.⁶⁴

This article might be seen as engendering a bit of confusion. That which is divinely ordained is discovered both by that which the Bible directly and positively teaches, and by that which may be gleaned by good and necessary inference. The “therefore,” therefore, if not misplaced, could be seen as ambiguous. Nevertheless, the basic point is true: that which is incidental to the carrying out of divine mandates is also Biblical, as well as obligatory upon the Church.

But too much emphasis on that point could mask the fact that the prescriptions of the Presbyterian Constitution on government, discipline, and worship include things that are both normative and situational—both doctrinal and circumstantial. And it could also lead to

64. E. T. Baird, “The Manner of Altering Our Doctrinal Standards,” *Southern Presbyterian Review* XIII 4 (January 1861) 717–719. The author was a pastor in Columbus, Mississippi.

65. This suggestion is akin to what has been called “minimalistic” church polity, as exemplified, for example, in the practice of the Reformed Presbyterian Church Hanover Presbytery. The Hanoverian approach is that of embracing the Westminster Standards (including not only the Confession of Faith and Catechisms but also the other products of the Westminster Assembly, such as the Directory for Public and Family Worship and the Form of Church-Government), while eschewing all other extra-Scriptural documents. The basis for Hanover’s position is that of “Constitutional Presbyterianism” or the “regulative principle of polity”—contemporary terms for a *jure divino* polity; and its best theoretical expression can be found in “The Pattern in the Heavens, Volume II: A Demonstration of the Manner in Which Scripture Alone Circumscribes the Polity of the New Covenant Temple, The Church,” a 2003 doctoral dissertation by Dr. Richard E. Bacon presented to Greenville (S.C.) Presbyterian Theological Seminary. Dr. Bacon has also written a more popular version, *Constitutional Presbyterianism* (Manassas, Va., and Clover, S.C.: Full Bible Publications, 2009).

an overemphasis on the details of church polity, with one of at least two results possible: either those circumstantial details will take on the same authority as that which is strictly Scriptural (whether by direct statement or good and necessary consequence), or the Biblical principles set forth regarding polity will be denigrated or lost totally.

This potential denigration is hinted at by means of the varying ordination vows taken: an ordinand subscribes to the Westminster Standards, but agrees only to “approve of the government and discipline of the Presbyterian Church.” Perhaps the way of strengthening ecclesiastical commitment to Biblical polity is by delineating the *doctrines* of government, discipline, and worship in the Constitution, while leaving *circumstantial details* to a secondary document, such as a set of by-laws.⁶⁵

Biblical Proof Texts

Besides this mixing of doctrine and circumstance, another potential weakness becomes apparent by comparing the Southern product with its predecessor. As published in the early nineteenth century, the PCUSA Constitution included the Westminster Standards and the other formularies: the Form of Government, the Rules of Discipline, and the Directory for Worship. Throughout the Form of Government were sprinkled Scripture proof texts. Of course, proof texts cannot be supplied for the circumstantial provisions. Nevertheless, there was an awareness of the importance of trying to justify the Church’s polity from the Word of God. As noted above, the 1872 Southern Presbyterian General Assembly had voted that its committee tasked with revising the Book of Church Order should add the proof texts. However, the very next year, the General Assembly dismissed the committee. After the committee was resurrected in 1876 by means of personal resolution on the floor of the Assembly, the assignment of adding the proof texts apparently was never accomplished. So while attention was paid to the “science” of church polity, the Bible references were left out.

V. SUMMARY

The reformulation of polity in the Southern Presbyterian Church was fueled by the Thornwell-Hodge debate on ecclesiology, spurred by the formal separation between North and South, and informed by the application of a scientific model to church polity. The employment of science—that is, not just analogies with

natural science, but also, more broadly, a systematic and logical approach—fit with the mindset of nineteenth century churchmen.⁶⁶

What we have seen is the utilization of science in order to conclude that church government consists of five heads. These Southern Presbyterian churchmen had formulated, if we may coin a phrase, the “taxonomy of polity.”

But while science formed a conceptual framework, there was also simultaneously an attempt to flesh out the meaning of the five “heads” of church polity. However, disagreement on some of the particulars led to a lengthy process before the revision was finally enacted.

These Southern Presbyterians believed that they were building on the historic foundation of their Reformed and Presbyterian forefathers, in contrast to the Northerners as represented by Charles Hodge at Princeton. Indeed, the PCUS leaders more than once skewered and tweaked their Northern counterparts. In 1869, a review article of a book by James Bannerman of the Free Church of Scotland stated: “Dr. Bannerman’s views are those which represent truly Scotch Presbyterianism. We suppose, indeed, that upon some points, Presbyterians on this side of the water may be in advance of their Scotch brethren and enjoy a fuller and a juster development of scriptural Presbyterianism. But if we are to appeal at all to our mother for confirmation of what we understand the Scriptures to teach, let us be sure that we refer to authorities respecting her understanding of the Scriptures who are qualified to represent her.”⁶⁷ That last sentence was a deliberate jab at Hodge for not appealing to the best of the Scottish sources—especially with respect to the ruling eldership.

The Southern tradition developed the theme of the doctrine of the five “heads” of polity, and eventually delineated those sections as “Doctrine of the Church,” etc. The Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) continues the Southern formulation; however, in its *Book of Church Order*, the particular sections (headings) dropped out, leaving just the bare statement in the first chapter regarding the five heads, and the chapters following in that order, but without specificity: like having the outline of a body but without the skeleton. The PCA’s *Book* also followed the PCUS in not adopting Scripture proof texts—thus further downplaying the doctrinal nature of polity, and lending credence to the notion that the *BCO* is more like a technical manual rather than a reflection of Biblical truth.

The Southern Presbyterians of the nineteenth century did not contemplate the relationship among the five heads in a sterile fashion: they had an organic view of

how these doctrines fit together—a notion that fit with their understanding of the organic unity of the Church itself. In 1857, Samuel J. Baird wrote an article, “Constitution of the Presbyterian Church,” in which he contrasted Presbyterianism with the other alternatives of polity: Hierarchicalism and Congregationalism. After noting that a Congregationalist or Independent system cannot logically support world missions, he observed the advantages of Presbyterianism:

Development by growth and subdivision is the law of this system. The growing church at Jerusalem sends forth its shoots to all quarters of the world, each of which taking root becomes a new centre of expansive and healing influence, pushing forth into other regions as yet unevangelized. At the same time, all recognize and cherish the relation of unity to the parent stock, and subordination to the authority which resides in the body of which it is the centre. The church of Scotland, planted by the labors of a few divinely enlightened men, maintains at first the communion of its in [sic] members through the annual convocation of its pastors and elders in one assembly. As it expands, this body develops [sic] an organization of subordinate synods, which, in their turn, are divided into presbyteries, each exercising in its sphere its distributive part of the functions of the body. A few missionaries of this church organize in Ulster a presbytery, which, by a like process, becomes the General Assembly of the Presbyterian church in Ireland. Driven from their homes by privation and persecution, a handful of members of these churches find themselves exiles from the means of grace, scattered in the wilds of the new world. Their call for help is heard; and a missionary from their native land erects, in their midst, the standard of the Cross, and performs the work of an evangelist by planting churches and dispensing the ordinances of the Gospel beneath the shades of the primeval forests. Others join in his labors, and the organization of the Church is completed. At first, half a dozen names make up their roll when met in full assembly. But, as years roll on, the infant Church expands with the widening continent, and creates out of its bosom a numerous retinue of synods and presbyteries, whose annual commissioners, in General Assembly, perpetuate the succession of the original court. Hundreds of thousands of souls, the flock of Christ in her fold, are

66. Notice even the title of J. A. Quarles’ 1881 article, “Our Church Policy—Shall it be Progress or Petrification?”: “petrification” is a technical term relating to fossilization.

67. Anonymous, “Bannerman’s Church of Christ,” *Southern Presbyterian Review* XX 4 (October 1869) 522.

led in the paths of knowledge and holiness by a growing multitude of ministers, her sons. By them the call of mercy is urged on unconverted millions throughout the land. Herself planted by the spirit of missions; her organization constructed in special adaptation to that work; her commission from Him who is the Prince of the kings of the earth; and her field the world; missionaries trained in her schools, commissioned and sent forth through her executive agencies, sustained by her contributions, and followed with her prayers, bear the glad tidings of salvation to the dark tribes of Asia and Africa, the aborigines of America, and the baptized pagans of Europe; and her General Assembly welcomes to its bosom commissioners from presbyteries which are springing into existence in India, China and Africa; the germinating courts of churches which shall yet flourish among regenerated nations, where heathenism now broods amid the gloom of the shadow of death.

Neither historically, nor in theory, is the system which thus unfolds itself one of confederate association, but of organic union. The functions and powers exercised under it are not derived by concessions of the inferior courts; nor do they primarily reside in theirs. Originating in the fountain Christ, and replenishing the spring-head—the Church catholic—his body; they flow downward from the higher courts in a rich and exhaustless stream, which, freighted with the riches of immortality, permeates every congregation, and pours the blessings of life and salvation into the heart of every believer.⁶⁸

Four decades later, F.P. Ramsay sounded the same theme. In his 1898 exposition of PCUS polity, we read: “Not only by the word, but also by the Holy Spirit, is the ascended Christ present with his Church; and this he is ever effectually discharging all his offices in his own living presence through the human media.” The Church is “but the completion of Christ, his bodying of himself forth: take him away, take away his living

activity, and the Church is nothing, and its authority is nothing” (Ramsay, *An Exposition of the Form of Government*, 22).

The five “heads” form the structure. But these Southern Presbyterian churchmen never forgot that the structure without life is worthless. And they realized that the life was in the body as a whole; or, to change the metaphor, in the vine and its branches.

VI. CONCLUSION

This article has explored a nexus of religious, intellectual, social, and cultural history—with the history of science thrown in for good measure. We hope that, though in a small and suggestive way, we have advanced the understanding, not only historically, but Biblically and theologically as well, by means of the application of Scriptural metaphors for the Church to polity, and especially to the five heads of church polity.

But metaphors, while informing, also entail a bit of mystery. It is not without reason, after all, that the Church is referred to as the mystical body of Christ.

The visible Church is a commonwealth of people, organized for the good of all, totally transparent, and overseen by elders. Her structure—her polity—is all to serve the whole, and to promote Christ’s relationship to His Church. The Apostle Paul in Ephesians 5 used the metaphor of the relationship between husband and wife to illustrate the relationship of Christ and His Bride. Paul describes that relationship as being a “great mystery.” Scripture often employs the term “mystery” to refer to some hidden truth that has now been revealed, and there is certainly a sense in which that is true regarding Christ and His mystical body. But there is often a connotation, at least, of something that is somehow beyond our ken—something which we still cannot fully grasp. Who, indeed, can fully fathom all that is entailed in the working of God’s Holy Spirit in the ministry of the Church? Who completely understands the way in which Christ both immediately and mediately rules over His kingdom?

No, we are all on the learning curve in these matters, and can only hope to continue to build a bit at a time. But what we can know is that Christ is pleased to use His visible Church, through its polity, discipline, and worship, in the evangelism of the world and the edification of the elect—a phenomenon which, in the final analysis, is among the best mysteries of all. ■

68. Samuel J. Baird, “Constitution of the Presbyterian Church,” *Southern Presbyterian Review* X 1 (April 1857) 1–16; available online at <http://www.pcahistory.org/periodicals/spr/v10/10-1-1.pdf>. The quotation is from pp. 12–13. This concept of the organic unity of the Church is found also in Adger’s 1874 article, “Church Power.” Besides considering the various uses of the concept of ecclesiastical power (including the distinction between joint and several power), the professor rang the changes on the oneness of the Church and of her courts. Every meeting of these courts is “solemn.” “They are making Church history. They are bearing the keys, and using them. They are opening the kingdom and shutting it.” See John B. Adger, “Church Power,” *Southern Presbyterian Review* XXV 4 (October 1874) 497–498.