

# Theology Matters

A Publication of Presbyterians for Faith, Family, and Ministry

Vol 21 No 2 • Spring 2015

*From the editor: The “Historic Principles of Church Order,” preserved in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Book of Order, date back to the first General Assembly in 1788. They are thus the common heritage of all who bear the name Presbyterian. In a sense too, they belong to Americans more broadly. These guidelines for decision-making in the church influenced the new nation as it established a constitution for political decision-making. More than one historian has remarked it was the Presbyterian Church that first modeled a republican form of government on this continent. Today, as “culture wars” fragment U.S. Presbyterians and strain the U.S. political system, we do well to recall the wisdom of these “Historic Principles of Church Order.” The following are edited excerpts from a series of sermons preached by the Rev. Dr. Randall Otto on the historic principles. The italicized and bolded quotes at the beginning of each section comprise the full text of the eight historic principles.*

## Historic Principles of Church Order What They Say Today by Randall Otto

*That “God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in anything contrary to his Word, or beside it, in matters of faith or worship.” Therefore we consider the rights of private judgment, in all matters that respect religion, as universal and unalienable: We do not even wish to see any religious constitution aided by the civil power, further than may be necessary for protection and security, and at the same time, be equal and common to all others. (F-3.0101)*

When we speak of Presbyterianism, we are speaking not of a theology so much as a form of church government that is based on a particular theology, Reformed theology. Reformed theology, accenting the innate and complete depravity of humanity, requires the idea of checks and balances on any in power lest any particular individual be invested with too much power, which he will inevitably be tempted to use to his own ends. Presbyterianism thus recognizes the call to responsible liberty under a system of checks and balances, all under the dominion of the triune God as he is revealed in his Word.

However, where God’s Word is not clear, i.e., where there may be legitimate difference of opinion on what Scripture teaches on a particular matter, both Scripture and confession urge latitude, what the Westminster Confession spoke of under the heading “Of Christian Liberty and Liberty of Conscience.” The first portion of the first principle is taken directly from the Westminster Confession (6.109), for which Romans 14 serves as one of the proof texts. We are free in Christ “from the guilt of sin, the condemning wrath of God, the curse of the moral law,” as this section of the confession begins, and

have “free access to God,” as well as the privilege of “yielding obedience to him, not out of slavish fear, but a childlike love, and a willing mind” (6.108).

Presbyterianism has never required rigid conformity. What is essential has been obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ based on the clear teaching of the Word of God. However, while Scripture is clear on the essentials of faith and practice, what the Reformers termed “the perspicuity of Scripture,” there are areas of faith and practice that are not altogether clear, what the Reformers termed *adiaphora*, “things indifferent,” things about which good people seeking to be faithful could legitimately disagree. The apostle Paul addresses that issue in Romans 14.

In this text, the apostle Paul addresses issues of eating and observance of certain days. Some Jewish believers Paul may be addressing could have felt that they must still comply with the dietary obligations found in the Law of Moses. In Matthew 15, Jesus had castigated the Pharisees and scribes for “teaching human precepts as doctrines.” Responding to their question why his disciples broke the tradition of the elders in not washing their hands before they ate, Jesus invalidates their tradition as humanly contrived, not divinely commanded, and states, “[I]t is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles” (15:11). In other words, Jesus seemed to be indicating that Jewish dietary laws were no longer of concern, but what is in the heart.

However, this would have been a major point of concern for many Jewish believers in Jesus, and Paul recognizes that. Thus, he advises that those who have no such qualms not judge those who do: “Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat; for God has welcomed them.” In other words, whether some eat meat and others only vegetables was of no real consequence. Both are acceptable to God in Christ! Hence, neither should judge the other.

Similarly, “some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike” (Romans 14:5). Those coming from a Jewish background would have felt more of an obligation to observe the requirements surrounding the Sabbath, such as how far they could walk or when and how to cook, while those who were Gentiles would have felt no such constraints. Here again, Paul says, it does not matter. These are not issues central to the faith; rather, it is a matter of conscience. “Let all be fully convinced in their own minds,” he says. The important focus is that, whether they eat meat or not, whether they observe a day or not, they do what they do “in honor of the Lord” and “give thanks to God” (14:6).

As believers in Christ, we are not our own; we belong to him who loved us and gave himself for us. “We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves,” Paul says. “We are the Lord’s” in life and in death. He is Lord of all facets of our lives, and there is freedom in those areas where there is no clear command or where we may legitimately interpret his Word differently from others of good faith. There is thus to be no despising a brother or sister who may interpret and/or act differently from us in those matters. “Each of us will be accountable to God” (14:12). We will all give an account of how we’ve lived. We must thus better be “fully convinced” of the position we’ve taken on the things we do!

Freedom of conscience is ours in Christ, *not* to do whatever *we* wish, but to do what *he* wishes! Where there is no clear command, we may draw inferences based on principles found in his Word to do what we believe God would have us do. These “rights of private judgment” Presbyterianism regards as “universal and unalienable.” No one should be compelled by civil power beyond what is necessary for protection and security to comply with any religious constitution. This is something similar to First Amendment protection against the establishment of any particular denomination as a state church which all must support. Presbyterianism recognizes, as Jesus emphasized, religious commitment must be a commitment of the heart. God wants us to worship him “in spirit and in truth” (John 4:24), to love “not in word or speech, but in truth and action” (1 John 3:18).

In her article “What Do Presbyterians Believe about Lord of the Conscience?” published in the March 2003 issue of *Presbyterians Today*, Margo Houts notes:

At its best, the “God alone is Lord of the conscience” slogan will function, as it does in our constitution, as a warning against tyranny by the majority against the minority. When used correctly, it means that “my conscience is captive to the Word of God. Only God is Lord of it. Only God’s Word has the right to bind it.” In other words, if a community standard is contrary to my informed understanding of God’s revealed will in Scripture, God sets me free to dissent from it, and then either passively submit to the standard or peaceably withdraw from the community. At its worst, the slogan will be used to defy, not merely dissent from, corporate judgment. It is used incorrectly when it is used to mean “conscience is my master.” It is used incorrectly when it leads to schism.

It is used incorrectly when it is used to justify that which Scripture clearly calls sin. As the Westminster Confession says, “They who, upon pretense of Christian liberty, do practice any sin, or cherish any lust, do

thereby destroy the end of Christian liberty; which is, that, being delivered out of the hands of our enemies, we might serve the Lord without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him, all the days of our lives.” Christian liberty is for the purpose of enabling us to fully live before the Lord who bought us “in holiness and righteousness.” God’s moral law is the standard by which we know his righteousness. We are not saved by obeying the law, which we cannot ever fully do; Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us (Galatians 3:11-13); however, we are saved by Christ through faith so that by God’s power we may live out God’s law more fully, since it is the “perfect rule of righteousness” (Westminster Confession, 6.102).

Those who have acted to change our constitution to validate what Scripture unequivocally calls sin “destroy the end of Christian liberty,” deny the first principle of our historic church order, and repudiate the transformational power of the gospel they purport to proclaim. Scripture is unequivocal in all it says with

***That, in perfect consistency with the above principle of common right, every Christian Church, or union or association of particular churches, is entitled to declare the terms of admission into its communion, and the qualifications of its ministers and members, as well as the whole system of its internal government which Christ hath appointed; that in the exercise of this right they may, notwithstanding, err, in making the terms of communion either too lax or too narrow; yet, even in this case, they do not infringe upon the liberty or the rights of others, but only make an improper use of their own.*** (F-3.0102)

What is involved in joining a church? As you might expect, that depends on the church. In some instances, it can be a very involved period of study that can take years, as in the Roman Catholic Church, whereas in other instances, like many Baptist churches, one can come forward at an altar call and, having professed his faith in Jesus to the pastor, the congregation votes him into membership on the spot! In the Presbyterian Church, there may be a period of study, which is certainly preferable, but that can also be undertaken after one has joined. To join a Presbyterian Church, one simply needs to share a credible profession of faith in Jesus as the Son of God and as personal Savior with the elders, the session, the most basic governing body in the life of every particular Presbyterian church.

I as a Minister of Word and Sacrament am not a member of this particular church, but rather a member of the presbytery, the council that, as the old Form of Government put it, is “a *corporate* expression of the church consisting of all the churches and ministers of the Word and Sacrament within a certain district.” This is where we get the words found in the second principle for today, “corporate judgment”—there is a *corporate* expression of the church in any *council*, and there are several councils in the Presbyterian Church: the session, the presbytery, the synod, and the General Assembly, levels of accountability before representatives who are

regard to sexual practice, that it is to be limited to marriage, and that marriage is between a man and a woman. These are not matters for Christian liberty, but rather for Christian obedience to the clear commandments of God.

The church is not ours to alter as we wish. The church is the Lord’s, who bought it with his own blood. The church must not conform itself to the principles of the world, but to the teaching of the Word of God. Where there is no clear teaching, there is freedom within the bounds of Scripture; where there is clear teaching, such as in regard to sexual ethics and marriage, there is the freedom of obedience to God’s clear command. The goal in both instances is that we might live in holiness and righteousness all the days of our lives. Let us, then, exercise care in the use of the “right of judgment,” knowing that the final judgment is the Lord’s, before whom we must all one day give an account.

to act on behalf of the will of Christ. A council has many functions:

They may frame symbols of faith, bear testimony against error in doctrine and immorality in life, resolve questions of doctrine and of discipline, give counsel in matters of conscience, and decide issues properly brought before them under the provisions of this Book of Order.... They have power to establish plans and rules for the worship, mission, government, and discipline of the church and to do those things necessary to the peace, purity, unity, and progress of the church under the will of Christ. They have responsibility for the leadership, guidance, and government of that portion of the church which is under their jurisdiction (G-3.0102).

Clearly, these councils exercise judgment, inasmuch as they are called upon to govern and discipline that portion of the church under their jurisdiction. The session thus governs the local church, the presbytery the group of churches within a particular area, the synod that group of churches within a region, and the General Assembly the entirety of the national Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), all by means of elected representatives, i.e., teaching and ruling elders. There is

mutual accountability, all under the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

If this seems quite similar to our form of civil government in this country, that is because our form of civil government is this federal or republican form, one which has drawn on the principles found in Presbyterianism.

In our text for today, the issue of the terms of admission of Gentiles into the church is addressed. There was a party who believed in Jesus as Lord and Savior, but who insisted that keeping the Law of Moses was essential to salvation. The book of Galatians is Paul's response to this group; there he emphasizes that Christ has set us free from the demands of the law. "All who rely on the works of the law are under a curse," he says (Gal. 3:10). "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree'—in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith" (Gal. 3:13-14). "If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise" (Gal. 3:29). In other words, Gentiles do not need to be circumcised and obey the Mosaic civil and ceremonial obligations that have, in fact, been done away in Christ, for they are by faith in Jesus made part of the Israel of God, the church, and are Jews, not in the flesh, but in the spirit.

The fact that the book of Galatians was written at least ten years after the Council in Jerusalem shows the enduring nature of this question regarding Gentile observance of the law. Here, in Acts 15, the church addresses this issue for the first time in any official capacity—it declares the terms of admission. The apostles and elders, serving in the capacity of a presbytery, consider the question, recognizing the power of Peter's vision of the sheets in Acts 10 where, having seen all kinds of animals forbidden under the law for Jews to eat, God says in the vision, "Kill and eat," admonishing Peter not to call profane what God has made clean. This taught him Gentiles should be admitted into the church, the new Israel, for, "in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us" (Acts 15:9). Peter advises that the yoke that the Jews could not bear should certainly not be placed on the Gentiles. Paul and Barnabas share their testimonies regarding the work of the Lord in the hearts of the Gentiles, leading James, the brother of Jesus and the leader of the church in Jerusalem, to declare that Gentiles should not be troubled by the law's requirements, but should abstain from food offered to idols, from sexual immorality, from meat of strangled animals and from blood, regulations viewed as central to the Mosaic law.

It is worth observing that none of the three food directives has ever been a source of real contention. In contradistinction to the commands related to food, the issue of sexual immorality has been a source of great debate and discussion since the beginning of the church. There are references to the prohibition of sexual immorality in most of the letters of the apostle Paul. Sexual immorality is the work of the flesh, opposed to the Spirit (Gal. 5:19). The church is to "abstain from fornication; that each one of you know how to control your own body in holiness and honor, not with lustful passion, like the Gentiles who know not God"; "whoever rejects this rejects not human authority but God" (1 Thess. 4:3-5, 8). Those who engage in homosexual acts do so because "God gave them up to degrading passions," "because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie" (Rom. 1:24, 26). "Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God. And this what some of you used to be. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God" (1 Cor. 6:9-11). Those who have truly come to Christ will resist the tendencies to violate God's law and to follow their own passions out of gratitude to God for the great sacrifice he made for our salvation in Christ. Or they should.

The corporate judgment of the church universal throughout history is that sex outside of marriage is sin and that marriage is between a man and a woman. There really is no contesting this; there is only rebellious refusal to obey the clear teaching of God's Word. Yes, churches are entitled to declare the terms of admission into their communion and the qualifications of their members and ministers. It is pathetic, however, that the Presbyterian Church, together with most other mainline denominations, now promotes the validation of that which Scripture expressly states is "contrary to the sound teaching that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God" (1 Tim. 1:10-11).

Advocates of the ordination of those who are by biblical standards sexual immoral are not oblivious to the unequivocal teaching of Scripture on this matter; one can only assume they do not care! How do we interact on the wider levels of corporate judgment, with sessions, presbyteries, synods, and on the General Assembly level, with councils that are no longer able to "bear testimony against error in doctrine and immorality in life," that see some politically correct social agenda as more important than the clear and consistent teaching of the Word of God and the church universal and who thereby in essence repudiate the ordination vows they have taken to be "led by the Scriptures and Confessions as they lead the people of God"?

How do we work with councils that allow fundamentals of theology and ethics to be matters of conscience, as though Scripture is thus allowed to mean whatever anyone wishes it to mean or can be disregarded altogether? As the Scots Confession says, “So far then as the council confirms its decrees by the plain Word of God, so far do we reverence and embrace them. But if men, under the name of a council, pretend to forge for us new articles of faith, or to make decisions contrary to the Word of God, then we must utterly deny them as the doctrine of devils, drawing our souls from the voice of the one God to follow the doctrines and teachings of men” (3.20). What kind of message do we as a church send to the world when we validate or promote living in open violation and rebellion against the clear teaching of Scripture? How are they who do so sexually to be validated anymore than someone who persistently and

***That our blessed Savior, for the edification of the visible Church, which is his body, hath appointed officers, not only to preach the gospel and administer the Sacraments, but also to exercise discipline, for the preservation of both truth and duty; and that it is incumbent upon these officers, and upon the whole Church, in whose name they act, to censure or cast out the erroneous and scandalous, observing, in all cases, the rules contained in the Word of God.*** (F-3.0103)

Whatever method of discipline a parent chooses, it is, I think we would all agree, incumbent upon a parent to require obedience to that which is fundamental to a family structure and to provide an appropriate means of correction when children do not obey. This is certainly in keeping with Scripture, which repeatedly admonishes children to heed the instruction of their parents, an idea certainly involved in the fifth command to “honor your father and mother.” Proverbs 13:24 adds, “Those who spare the rod hate their children, but those who love them are diligent to discipline them.” In other words, correction or punishment should be seen as an indication of love and concern. This idea is embodied in the phrase “caring enough to confront.” Those who let their children do what they wish, who let them “run wild,” are hardly more loving; they are in fact less loving! Those who love their children set boundaries for them and provide an appropriate means of correction when those boundaries are crossed.

The church is the family of God, our spiritual family, so the same ideas apply. Officers in the church have the role of spiritual “parents.” It is not coincidental that the apostle John repeatedly addresses his readers as “my children” and that leaders in the church, the elders, are to be obeyed, “for they are keeping watch over your souls” (Heb. 10:17). It is not that the elders are better than anyone else or have some kind of “holier than thou” attitude; rather, in the ordination questions posed to the congregation, the members of the church “accept” them as “chosen by God through the voice of this congregation to lead us in the way of Jesus Christ.”

openly steals from others or engages in other conduct clearly contrary to the teaching of Scripture?

Does the fact that the *Book of Order* no longer stipulates what someone cannot do mean they are free to do whatever they wish that is not specifically denied? Since “fidelity in marriage and chastity outside of marriage” is now no longer in the *Book of Order*, are ministers or elders free to engage in any sexual conduct they wish? Of course not! The *Book of Order* still stipulates, “*Councils shall be guided by Scripture and the confessions in applying standards to individual candidates*” (G-2.0104b). Scripture and the confessions *require fidelity in marriage and chastity outside of marriage.*

With the teaching elder or Minister of Word and Sacrament, ruling elders “exercise leadership, government, spiritual discernment, and discipline” in a particular church (G-2.0301). This is why elders “should be persons of strong faith, dedicated discipleship, and love of Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord” (G-2.0104). They participate in the corporate judgment of which we spoke in the second historic principle of church order, and in addition to serving on the session, may serve on higher councils, such as committees or judicial bodies of the presbytery, synod, or General Assembly.

Our *Book of Order* makes it clear that councils of the church are distinct from the government of a state and have no civil jurisdiction. They have “only ecclesiastical jurisdiction for the purpose of serving Jesus Christ and declaring and obeying his will in relation to truth and service, order and discipline.” In this capacity, however, they may “bear testimony against error in doctrine and immorality in life, resolve questions of doctrine and discipline, give counsel in matters of conscience, and decide issues properly brought before them” (G-3.0102). It is, I would suggest, because church leadership has been reluctant to undertake these tasks or remiss in them that we are now in the moral quagmire where we are.

The Confession of 1967 put it well:

Anarchy in sexual relationships is a symptom of man’s alienation from God, his neighbor, and himself. Man’s perennial confusion about the meaning of sex has been aggravated in our day

by the availability of new means for birth control and the treatment of infection, by the pressures of urbanization, by the exploitation of sexual symbols in mass communication, and by world overpopulation. The church, as the household of God, is called to lead men out of this alienation into the responsible freedom of the new life in Christ. Reconciled to God, each person has joy in and respect for his own humanity and that of other persons; a man and woman are enabled to marry, to commit themselves to a mutually shared life, and to respond to each other in sensitive and lifelong concern; parents receive the grace to care for children in love and to nurture their individuality. The church comes under the judgment of God and invites rejection by man when it failed to lead men and women into the full meaning of life together, or withholds the compassion of Christ from those caught in the moral confusion of our time. (9.47)

Look how far we've slid since that time. Far from leading people "out of this alienation into the responsible freedom of the new life in Christ," the mainline churches are now calling people to embrace their alienation as a gift from God, calling for those of the same sex to be able to marry and for pension benefits to go to those in such relationships, to allow sexual expression apart from any sense of "lifelong concern" or, most importantly, concern over the foundations for life together in Scripture. Is it any wonder that we may now be standing "under the judgment of God," who has allowed us to get to this moral morass, this disregard for Scripture and confession, and this denial of the ordination vows all elders have taken to be led by Scripture and confession as they lead the people of God? All of the mainline churches have been hemorrhaging membership for decades. We have invited rejection by others for failing to lead men and women into the full meaning of life together. We in too many cases offer nothing more than a rubber stamp to the prevailing norms of a culture beset by alienation. We've let the children "run wild."

This is very similar to the situation found in our text for today. The apostle Paul addresses an issue of sexual ethics in the church at Corinth, a situation in which a man was engaging in sex with his father's wife, apparently his stepmother. Paul has been made aware (note the wording "it is actually reported") of this situation involving sexual immorality in the church. He did not go looking in people's bedrooms as some kind of "morality police." No pastor or elder has any such interest—at least they shouldn't. However, once something becomes public, once they are made aware of it, once "it is reported," they are responsible for what they know, as we all are.

What will they do? Will they act like Sergeant Schultz in the old "Hogan's Heroes" show who, when he knew the POWs under his watch were up to something they weren't supposed to be doing, would say, "I know nothing!" Will they celebrate the free sexual expression of this person? Or will they act to correct someone under their care who's got things very wrong?

Apparently the leadership at Corinth took one of the first two postures; it certainly did not act to correct the one who had committed the sexual immorality. They evidently made light of it. Paul says, "Should you not rather have mourned, so that he who has done this would have been removed from among you?" (1 Cor. 5:2). Paul says they should have mourned over a fellow Christian's fall into grievous public sin.

We are not talking about the arrogant and seemingly self-righteous judgment that was so evident in the Pharisees. That is the picture we often get of any form of ecclesiastical discipline painted in the form of a "witch hunt" or an inquisition. But that is not the way Scripture portrays undertaking discipline. Those who have care for a flock, upon hearing of a sheep that has gone astray, go after it with great concern, seeking how best to restore it to the flock. Thus, Peter says, "I exhort the elders among you to tend the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising the oversight, not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it—not for sordid gain but eagerly. Do not lord it over those in your charge, but be examples to the flock." (1 Pet. 5:2-3)

Paul counsels the Corinthian church to remove the sexual immoral brother from their midst until he repents: "[H]and this man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord" (5:5). Clearly, Paul's desire was not to "kick somebody out of the church," but to remove one who could lead the entire church astray till he came to realize his sin, repented, and was restored to Christ. The goal here is twofold: to protect the rest of the church from an evil influence ("the yeast of malice and evil") and to correct and restore an erring brother.

I know someone is probably thinking, "Didn't Jesus say, 'Do not judge, so that you may not be judged' (Matt. 7:1)?" The focus there is on *hypocritical* judgment, on seeing a speck in your neighbor's eye but not noticing the log in one's own. I've had elders tell me, "We're all sinners, so how can I say anything about anyone else?" Yes, we are all sinners, but we *don't want to be*. If we want to be right with God, we don't ignore our sin or rationalize it away. We confess it, which means we say what God says about it, that it is hurtful to our relationships with God, others, and ourselves, and we repent, we turn from it, seeking a new obedience. Parents aren't perfect, but they're still called upon to

correct their children and show them the right way to go.

A large part of the reason we're at this depth of decay in our denominations is that the church has turned a blind eye to all kinds of sin in the name of tolerance, political correctness, and fear of seeming judgmental. Others can always caricature what they don't understand or don't like, but the reality is the apostles call those who have responsibility over a flock to shepherd it with care,

***That truth is in order to goodness; and the great touchstone of truth, its tendency to promote holiness, according to our Savior's rule, "By their fruits ye shall know them." And that no opinion can either be more pernicious or more absurd than that which brings truth and falsehood upon a level, and represents it as of no consequence what a man's opinions are. On the contrary, we are persuaded that there is an inseparable connection between faith and practice, truth and duty. Otherwise it would be of no consequence either to discover truth or to embrace it.*** (F-3.0104)

One of the great ironies in the history of the world occurred in the early morning of what we call Good Friday, when Jesus stood before Pontius Pilate for the first time and Jesus said to him, as recorded in John 18: "For to this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." To this Pilate famously replied, "What is truth?"

Pilate had the Truth of God standing before him and yet challenged Jesus on the very idea of truth! Pilate's question of Jesus echoed an intellectualist approach to truth based in the Greek philosophical tradition that in many ways prevails yet today. We can debate things and analyze things and try to be the one who's right, but in the end, what difference does any of it make? Every student along the way asks himself, and perhaps his instructor: "Why do we need to know this? What's the point?"

Perhaps nowhere is this more evident than in the modern university, which is no longer really true to its name. "University" is an amalgamation of two ideas, that of unity amidst diversity, the unity having been the idea of God as the source and goal, the beginning and end, of all truth in the Middle Ages when the university was born. Today, with God having largely been removed from the public university as the basis and goal of truth, we have a multiplicity of disciplines, a great diversity of data and lots of ideas and perhaps facts, but nothing that unifies it.

The "uni" has been removed from the "university," leaving only "diversity," with people increasingly today taking up a position on truth that is called "postmodern," but which is as old as Adam and Eve, seeing each individual and his own experience as in many ways the basis and arbiter of truth. Each sees himself as having "his truth" or "her truth." Truth thus devolves into a personal and subjective perspective which really cannot be argued with or challenged, or so

compassion, and correction where needed. No human being has ultimate judgment over another's soul; that is God's prerogative. However, isn't it better to know now what God says about public disobedience, while one still has the opportunity to repent, than to leave another to continue in error and potentially lose his soul? Don't we owe that kind of love to those who have gone astray, that they may return to the Lord?

people often think. Each therefore does what is right in his own eyes, since each views himself in some way as having ultimate authority and woe be to anyone who asserts someone is wrong!

Of course, if there is no objective truth to which people's own ideas of truth must correspond, then no one can ever really be wrong and a fundamental law of logic, the law of non-contradiction, must go out the window. The law of non-contradiction says something cannot be both true and not true at the same time when dealing with the same context. For example, I cannot both be here preaching and not be here preaching at the same time. One proposition must be true, namely that I am here preaching.

In the Bible, truth is much more than simply an intellectual exercise and is most definitely more than personal subjective experience. In the Bible, truth is a quality which properly belongs to God. God is the "God of truth" (Ps. 31:5, as NASB, NIV, et al.), the source of all truth. Truth involves more than mere facts, however; it involves faithfulness, dependability; thus the RSV and NRSV rendering of Ps. 31:5, "the faithful God." The Hebrew verb *aman* means to "confirm, stand firm, trust." It is the root from which we get our word "Amen," which is more than just a way to end our prayers, as though we were saying goodbye to God or telling anyone else who's there that we're done! "Amen" means "let it be so," or "it is true." Thus, when Jesus says several times in the gospels, "Truly, truly, I say to you" (as to Nicodemus in John 3), the Greek says, "Amen, Amen, I say to you." Jesus is speaking as one with divine authority. He is more than just a spokesperson for God; he is God, in their midst, speaking to them!

As truth is a quality inherent in God, it is also a quality in all he says and does, because he is perfectly dependable. "The ordinances of the Lord are true and righteous altogether" (Ps. 19:9). "He will judge the

world with righteousness, and the peoples with truth” (Ps. 96:13). Because God is true and all he says and does is true and righteous, God also demands truth and righteousness of humanity. He desires truth in our hearts (Ps. 51:6). We must speak the truth (Ps. 15:2) and seek the truth (Jer. 5:1) and walk in the truth (2 Kings 20:3). The apostle John wrote, “I have no greater joy than this, to hear that my children are walking in the truth” (3 John 4).

This brings us, then, to our fourth principle: “...[T]here is an inseparable connection between faith and practice, truth and duty.” God does that which is true and good because he himself is altogether true and good. He cannot do otherwise. We as sinners, on the other hand, can do otherwise, but God calls us through the new birth, by which “his divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness,” so we “may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust, and become participants of the divine nature” (2 Pet. 1:3-4). The new birth, regeneration by the Spirit, makes us new creatures in Christ and gives us a new motivating principle of power for life and godliness.

Christian belief is not just *trying to do* better, as though we were turning over a new leaf or making a New Year’s resolution; it is *being* better—we are different in our being, because the Spirit of God lives within. *Belief* has to do with *what we live by*. Christian belief has to do with living like Christ, emulating his example from the heart, from having been changed from within because he indwells us.

The indwelling principle is what determines the results. It is the genetic makeup of a peach tree that makes it bear peaches and not plums. If the peach trees in our backyard starting bearing something other than peaches, I’d know there was something wrong with them. Jesus said you know what something is by its fruit, since grapes don’t come from thorns or figs from thistles. He said every good tree bears good fruit. Of course, other circumstances can adversely affect fruit. Our peach trees are good trees and right now have lots of peaches growing on them, but they usually wind up looking less appealing because we don’t spray them. The outside influences of fungi and insects can have a corrupting effect.

I’m certain Jesus was well aware of this twofold problem in humanity. We have an inward corruption of natural depravity and we have outside influences that can corrupt us as well. It is for that reason that he warns of following the crowd through the wide way that leads to destruction and of giving heed to false prophets who come to God’s people in sheep’s clothing.

Jesus warns that those who are false prophets may seem to speak on his behalf and even be able to do amazing things, like miracles. Good, however, is not measured by how amazing something is or by any other standard than by conformity to the Word of truth. Remember all the rich young ruler said he’d done to have eternal life, but he couldn’t bring himself to sacrifice, to deny himself and follow Jesus. Jesus said there was only one who is good in a normative and absolute sense and that is God. We might think we’re good, and we may be in others’ eyes, but it is God’s viewpoint that really matters.

Knowing God, knowing Jesus, knowing Scripture, means conforming ourselves to the truth of God’s Word. Admittedly, we all fall short, but we do not excuse our failure and certainly do not ask God to bless our disobedience to the clear teaching of his Word; rather, we must repent and change our hearts and minds so that we might seek a new obedience, a greater faithfulness. Those who by word or deed advocate that which Scripture clearly calls sin have “exchanged the truth of God for a lie” (Rom. 1:25)—the context here specifically referring to homosexual practice. It may be politically correct to advocate for homosexual practice, but that is the way of the world, the wide way that leads to destruction. Jesus calls for those living in sin to “go and sin no more,” to repent, and seek new obedience from the heart.

The mainline denominations have so embraced an idea of truth grounded in subjective, personal experience that Scripture has become for some almost irrelevant. Time and again the scenario plays out in debates on sexuality between liberals and conservatives on the floor of presbyteries: liberals plead their case on the basis of personal experience and subjectivity, often accompanied by tears flowing from a sense of victimization or sympathy for those they consider the “oppressed,” while conservatives plead their case on the basis of Scripture and the historic teaching of the church universal. Amazingly, in liberal presbyteries it is regularly the case that subjectivity and personal experience trump Scripture and the voice of the Spirit that has spoken throughout the ages!

We are to take every thought captive to make it obedient to Christ (2 Cor. 10:5). As we think in our hearts, so we are. What proceeds out of the heart, that is what defiles, said Jesus (Matt. 15:18). It is the heart’s relation to God that makes something good. That is why the prayer, even the sacrifice, of the wicked is “an abomination” to the Lord (Prov. 28:9; 21:27). The heart is not right before God. We are to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. We love him by obeying his commandments, not just outwardly as the Pharisees did from their proud and obstinate hearts (see Matt. 23), but from hearts that are purified and moved by the Spirit.



God is the truth and the source of all goodness. His Word is Truth, both incarnate and written. He calls us to embrace that truth, conform ourselves to it, and to demonstrate the effects of that truth in our lives by thinking and doing that which is true, pure, peaceable, and good (Phil. 4:8). I fear for those who think truth and goodness are determined by political correctness, who

***That, while under the conviction of the above principle we think it necessary to make effectual provision that all who are admitted as teachers be sound in the faith, we also believe that there are truths and forms with respect to which men of good characters and principles may differ. And in all these we think it the duty both of private Christians and societies to exercise mutual forbearance toward each other. (F-3.0105)***

On Oct. 1-4, 1529, there was a meeting in Marburg, Germany, of two of the key leaders of the Reformation, the German Martin Luther and the Swiss Ulrich Zwingli. Eight days prior to their meeting, as D'Aubigné records in his multi-volume *History of the Reformation*, Muslims were crossing the frontiers of Germany and had surrounded the walls of Vienna. While battle raged nearby for the very existence of Christian faith in Europe, Luther and Zwingli met to discuss how those parts of Christendom which had separated from Rome "could remain one."

From the start Luther protested the possibility of any unity on the basis of his particular view of the presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper, since Zwingli held to a different view, one more of a spiritual presence of Christ. Both men denied the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation and held in common all the primary tenets of the Reformation: that salvation is by God's grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone revealed in Scripture alone. The hour was dark, with the "sweating sickness," some unknown but virulent disease that had originated in England, "carrying off men around them by thousands," the Muslim armies at the door, and concerns that Reformation might falter under the reprisals of the Catholic Church.

"Let us confess our union in all things in which we agree," said Zwingli, "and as for the rest, let us remember that we are brothers. There will never be peace between the churches, if, while we maintain the grand doctrine of salvation by faith, we cannot differ on secondary points." Zwingli, with tears of hope for unity, approached Luther and held out his hand. But Luther rejected the hand that was offered him: "You have a different spirit from ours," said he. These words communicated to the Swiss, as it were, an electric shock. (4:533). Convinced his particular view of the Lord's Supper "was essential to salvation," Luther and his camp "considered all those who rejected it as outside the pale of the faith."

think they can ignore, change, or resist God's Word. They reenact the perniciousness (which means "leading to ruin") of Pilate, as they themselves stand before the Truth and challenge or deny it, going astray and leading others astray. Genuine knowledge of the truth should change us, moving us to loving and doing the will of God.

Were the story to end there, it would be a sad one indeed. Luther, however, softened by the spirit of the Swiss, allowed, "If we persevere in prayer, brotherhood will come." That evening Luther toiled on a report that the next day included the following: "Although at present we are not agreed on the question whether the real body and blood of Christ are corporeally present in the bread and wine, yet both the interested parties shall cherish more and more a truly Christian charity for one another, so far as conscience permits; and we will all earnestly implore the Lord to condescend by his Spirit to confirm us in the sound doctrine" (4:534).

This is a classic case study in majoring on the minors and allowing a particular position to get in the way of the mind and love of Christ. Fortunately, because both Luther and Zwingli each truly had sound doctrinal views and differed in such an insignificant way on how Christ was present in the Supper, they were able to come to an agreement, even if simply to disagree on that one minor point. The Reformed church needed them to do that then, particularly with the advance of Islam, varied opinions among Christians, and fearful living conditions fed by ravaging sickness.

Conditions are not all that different today. We too are faced with the rising threat of militant Islam, with religious innovation or indifference, and with fearful living conditions fed by economic uncertainty. The people of God need to have teachers who are sound in doctrine preaching the faith once for all delivered to the saints from the pulpits and putting aside minor differences over unessential matters for the sake of providing a unified front against enemies within and without.

In the words of the apostle Paul, the church needs those who acknowledge that they will stand before God and Christ to be judged for how they've led others. This is why James 3:1 warns, "Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness." Teachers will be judged with greater strictness because

they are the ones who are entrusted with teaching others the will and way of God. They need to be able to differentiate between what is essential and what is not. They need to be sound in the faith, but also able to recognize “there are truths and forms with respect to which men of good characters and principles may differ.”

What are those essentials? That has itself been a point of disagreement historically, but perhaps never more so than in the present. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) seems clear on what is essential, holding in common with the church universal the creeds (notably the Nicene and Apostles) “with their definitions of the mystery of the triune God and of the incarnation of the eternal Word of God in Jesus Christ” (F-2.03). It also affirms the Protestant Reformation doctrines of “God’s grace in Jesus Christ revealed in the Scriptures,” of “grace alone, faith alone, Scripture alone” as embodying “principles of understanding which continue to guide and motivate the people of God in the life of faith” (F-2.04).

“Central to this tradition is the affirmation of the majesty, holiness, and providence of God who creates, sustains, rules, and redeems the world in the freedom of sovereign righteousness and love,” as well as “the election of the people of God for service as well as for salvation; covenant life marked by a disciplined concern for order in the church according to the Word of God; a faithful stewardship that shuns ostentation and seeks proper use of the gifts of God’s creation; the recognition of the human tendency to idolatry and tyranny, which calls the people of God to work for the transformation of society by seeking justice and living in obedience to the Word of God” (F-2.05).

In these statements, “the church declares to its members and to the world who and what it is, what it believes, what it resolves to do” (F-2.01). These are what should be considered “the essentials.” The essentials begin with and are founded in Scripture. Note how many times “Scripture” has been mentioned in what preceded. How else do we come to know God as Triune, and Jesus as God incarnate and the only atoning sacrifice for our sins?

“Insofar as Christ’s will for the Church is set forth in Scripture, it is to be obeyed” (F-1.0203). What is thus clearly stated in the Scriptures is to be preached and practiced. This certainly accords with the apostle’s command, “Proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince,

***That though the character, qualifications, and authority of Church officers are laid down in the Holy Scriptures, as well as the proper method of their investiture and institution, yet the election of the persons to the exercise of this authority, in any particular society, is in that society.*** (F-3.0106)

A question pastors often get asked is, “Do you get moved around or do you get to decide where you’ll

rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching” (2 Tim. 4:2). In other words, regardless of the winds of false doctrine, competing cultural mores, or political correctness, the apostle Paul, speaking on behalf of the risen Christ, demands that teachers proclaim the Word and will of the holy and sovereign God and call people to repent and embrace Christ by grace alone through faith alone as he is revealed in Scripture alone.

If someone has never been baptized and wishes to be baptized by immersion instead of being sprinkled, it is of no consequence to the Presbyterian Church, as either is fine. Similarly, how someone views the Lord’s Supper is not a point of fellowship in this church, since Presbyterians practice “open communion,” meaning any who have been baptized may come. How someone views eschatology, i.e., whether one is pre-, post- or amillennialist, is also not an issue, since good people have disagreed over such things. We should exercise tolerance, “mutual forbearance,” with others who may hold different views on these matters than we do.

This is not to say that anything goes, because it does not. The apostle Paul warns of those who “will not put up with sound doctrine,” but will “accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires” (2 Tim. 4:3). This is as true today as it was in Paul’s day. We cannot be indifferent to proclamation that seeks to justify what Scripture clearly calls sin, the acts of “murderers, fornicators, sodomites, slave traders, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me” (1 Tim. 1:10-11).

Yes, there are things over which good people can disagree, non-essentials, “things indifferent” as the Reformers characterized them. Sometimes the Reformers were not as good about differentiating those things as they ought to have been, but their goal was to ensure sound doctrine conforming to the will of Christ, which should be ours as well. We play fast and loose with the commands of God as they are clearly spelled out in Scripture to our own detriment and potential demise. In a time in which the world is rocked by alternative religions, moral confusion, and more, the world needs the church to provide clear teaching on what matters and loving latitude on what does not. It needs to hear the essentials of God’s Word and the will of God for our lives.

serve?” People ask that because they may be more familiar with an episcopal form of church government

in which there is a regional bishop who assigns pastors to a particular church and moves them around according to his determination of what is best. This is the kind of system that is found in the Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Anglican, and Methodist churches. Some of these believe that bishops derive their authority from an unbroken line of apostolic succession going back to the twelve apostles of Jesus.

For much of the early history of Christianity, episcopal government may have been the only known form of church organization. This changed with the Reformation. Many Protestant churches are now organized by either congregational or presbyterian church polities, the latter deriving from the writings of John Calvin. Calvin acknowledged that there was no definite form of church government to be drawn from the Scriptures, that it was thus up to each church to decide what seemed to be the most effective form.

Calvin's strong concerns about the depravity of humanity moved him to urge checks and balances on any one person's authority in the church. The presbyterian form of church government therefore involves rule of the church by multiple, elected elders, not by the dictates of one man or by the whole congregation. These elders must be chosen by the people from among themselves (men and women to whom they are willing to vow submission), but must also be examined and confirmed by the sitting board of elders in the congregation (session) or regional body of elders (presbytery).

This system differs from the previously mentioned episcopal form, which is the rule of the church by monarchical bishops, who need not be chosen by the people but can be appointed by a higher agency. Authority thus rests in the one human priest at the top (a pope or archbishop), is then communicated to his subordinates, and extends from there to the congregations.

Presbyterianism also differs from congregationalism, the form of government found in Baptist and "independent" churches, where the church is ostensibly governed by every member and each church is independent from all others. Authority there rests with the entire congregation. There may be ruling boards, but the congregation as a whole is the final voice in what a particular church does. If there are associations of churches, these are voluntary and have no binding authority over the affairs of their member churches.

As one who was once a Baptist, I know that some pastors in that tradition can have a great deal of power. If they lead large congregations or have some charismatic persona, they can too easily approximate the very monarchical episcopacy that they would claim to reject.

Some denominations try to combine ideas of Presbyterianism and Congregationalism, such as the United Church of Christ (UCC). There is no book of confessions for the UCC, but simple affirmation of the creeds of the universal church, though how one understands those will vary widely.

According to a sermon by the Rev. Scott Elliott of Riviera UCC in Palm Bay, Florida, there are lots of things you don't have to believe:

Christians don't have to believe that Christianity is the only path to God. Christians do not have to believe homosexuality is a sin. Christians don't have to believe God is all powerful. Christians don't have to believe God sent Jesus to earth to be tortured and put to death as a sacrifice required by God. Christians can, but do not have to, believe Jesus was literally born of a virgin.

So, in other words, you can be a "Christian" and disavow most of the major doctrines of Christianity! In the UCC, one can be a "Christian" and believe pretty much whatever he wishes! Who's going to tell him differently? If his congregation says it is alright, then it is, because the congregation has final authority.

Are we in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) heading down a path that leads to the amorphous religiosity of the United Church of Christ? Yes, we have a *Book of Confessions* and a *Book of Order*, but neither seems to be taken very seriously any longer. We in this denomination, together with many who call themselves Christians in this country and the West, seem to think we really *can* believe whatever we want. That is not the case!

In our text for today (Titus 1), the apostle Paul opens by saying he is "a servant of God and apostle of Jesus Christ," i.e., he *cannot* say or do what he wants, because he is beholden to a master, to God, and an authorized representative of the risen Christ. He has a responsibility to God, to the Christ who sacrificed himself for all his elect, and to "the faith" and "the knowledge of the truth that is in accordance with godliness." He must preach the word of the God "who never lies," "the proclamation with which I have been entrusted," Paul says. It is a sacred trust and those who claim to believe the Word and preach all kinds of myths, who reject the truth, are not progressive—they are "rebellious people, idle talkers, and deceivers" who "must be silenced." But how can they be silenced if no one has any authority over them or those who have such authority don't care?

Churches throughout this country are being gutted by those who think they're the master, who speak with a forked tongue, professing to know God but denying him

by their actions. Remember, as the fourth principle said, truth has the tendency to promote holiness. Putting truth and falsehood on the same level is “pernicious”; it leads to destruction. Remember principle three, which stated that there are officers in the church to preach the gospel, administer the sacraments, and exercise discipline for the preservation of both truth and duty. What if they won’t?

Paul tells Titus, his “loyal child in the faith,” that he has left him in Crete, an obviously difficult place to serve, “so that you should put in order what remained to be done, and should appoint elders in every town, as I directed you.” The word for “elders” is *presbyterous*, from which we get “Presbyterian.” These elders would appear to be those from whom the *episkopon*, the overseer or pastor, here translated as “bishop,” would be selected and “ordained” by the laying on of hands. The word translated “appoint” can also mean “ordain.”

How the leaders were selected, according to what form of government, is debatable, but new churches would very likely have required those that the apostle knew he could trust. Perhaps churches had a say in who was selected, as they clearly did in the selecting the first deacons who were then “appointed” to that task (Acts. 6:3), but we just cannot be sure.

***That all Church power, whether exercised by the body in general or in the way of representation by delegated authority, is only ministerial and declarative; that is to say, that the Holy Scriptures are the only rule of faith and manners; that no Church judicatory ought to pretend to make laws to bind the conscience in virtue of their own authority; and that all their decisions should be founded upon the revealed will of God. Now though it will easily be admitted that all synods and councils may err, through the frailty inseparable from humanity, yet there is much greater danger from the usurped claim of making laws than from the right of judging upon laws already made, and common to all who profess the gospel, although this right, as necessity requires in the present state, be lodged with fallible men.*** (F-3.0107)

When Martin Luther appeared before the Diet of Worms on April 19, 1521, he did so not simply at the behest of the Roman Catholic Church, but at the behest of the Emperor Charles V. Church and state were so intertwined in the period leading up to the Reformation that to defy the Church was also often viewed as an act against the state. Hence, when Luther was called before the imperial diet to recant his writings, he appeared before the emperor himself, princes and other political leaders, as well as the cardinals of the Catholic Church. There he made his famous stand: “Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the word of God. I cannot and I will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go

Clearly, however, there are personal and doctrinal requirements for any who will be so selected, found here in Titus 1 and throughout the pastoral epistles. An elder must preach and live out the truth of God’s Word, so he “may be able both to preach with sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict it.” It appears, then, that he is really not able to “believe whatever he wants” and still be a Christian. Indeed, as in principle three, “it is incumbent upon these officers, and upon the whole Church, in whose name they act, to censure or cast out the erroneous and scandalous.”

There is a connectional nature to the church. The gathering in Acts 15 to determine what would be required of Gentile believers showed that, and the entire covenantal nature of the church as the “new Israel” assures that is the case. Churches are really not separate entities that can do what they wish. The churches are part of one Church and what one does says something about them all. We have a responsibility to select those as leaders who fit the qualifications set forth by the Word of God and to test them to see if they measure up. If they don’t, you get rid of them. You don’t quietly move them to another congregation. People’s lives and souls are at stake here. This is not “playing church.” This is the work of God with effects for time and eternity.

against conscience. I cannot do otherwise, here I stand, may God help me. Amen.”

Luther’s stand was important for emphasizing that conscience cannot be bound, that no one can be compelled to believe anything. Luther stated what most people already recognized, that “synods and councils may err,” as our seventh principle says, “through the frailty inseparable from humanity.” Further, church and state have distinct jurisdictions, the church having to do with “faith and manners,” as our seventh principle says, while the state has to do with civil affairs, with how all within a society will live together regardless of their religious beliefs.

The most important thing Luther maintained in his famous stand, however, was that the church should be bound by the Scriptures, or, as our seventh principle says, “all their decisions should be founded upon the

revealed will of God” as it is stated in Holy Scripture, the only rule for faith and practice. As the Westminster Confession puts it, “The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man’s salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men” (6.006).

The focus of Presbyterian and Reformed theology has historically been the glory of God: “Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever” (Shorter Catechism, Q. 1). How shall we glorify God and enjoy him forever? “The Word of God which is contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments is the only rule to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him” (Shorter Catechism, Q. 2).

Based on these two opening statements of its historical teaching tool, the Westminster Shorter Catechism, one might assume that Scripture study would be a key focus of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). It is not. According to a 2012 PCUSA “Snapshot” of “Characteristics of Presbyterians,” most elders (52 percent) and even more members in general (61 percent) read the Bible “less than weekly.” Only 17 percent of elders and 14 percent of members can say that they read the Bible “daily or almost daily.”

How can elders vow that they will be led by the Scriptures and confessions as they lead the people of God and not read the Scriptures with any regularity? Is it because these elders are a bunch of liberals who just don’t believe the Bible? No! In fact, 40 percent consider themselves “conservative or very conservative.”

Our denomination, once renowned for being biblically focused and intellectually rigorous, is now neither. And it is reaping the fruit of a generation or more of biblical indifference, for close to half of the elders in this denomination say they were raised Presbyterian! We cannot blame the neglect of Scripture reading on anyone but ourselves. It is time for that neglect to change.

It must start in the home. The church can advise people to read, study, and worship, but cannot compel anyone and should not have to! Those who join a Presbyterian church vow to “be Christ’s faithful disciple, obeying his Word and showing his love.” No one should have to be coaxed and urged to the worship and work of the church they have voluntarily joined and vowed to uphold.

We are members one of another, as Paul says in Eph. 4:25. We are responsible to each other. Parents in particular must realize that they have a responsibility to demonstrate before their children the centrality of Scripture to everyday life. The apostle Paul began 2

Timothy by remarking to Timothy about his “sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you” (2 Tim. 1:5). Clearly, there was a vibrant faith evident in this family, a faith that was transmitted from grandmother to mother to son. Paul is able to say that Timothy, from his childhood, had known the sacred writings that are able to instruct all for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus (2 Tim. 3:15).

Most people make their commitment to a faith while they are in the teen years. That is the time of searching, of challenging established norms, but also of a willingness to commit to that which is meaningful and worthwhile. Interest in religion seems to be waning amongst this group, however, and what will be the outcome for both church and society?

According to a Pew Forum poll released in February 2010, “Americans ages 18 to 29 are considerably less religious than older Americans. Fewer young adults belong to any particular faith than older people do today. They also are less likely to be affiliated than their parents’ and grandparents’ generations were when they were young.” Yet these young people remain fairly traditional in their religious beliefs and practices, with beliefs about life after death and the existence of heaven, hell, and miracles quite similar to the beliefs of older people today.

Though young adults pray less often than their elders do today, the number of young adults who say they pray every day is comparable to young people who said the same in prior decades. And though belief in God is lower among young adults than among older adults, Millennials say they believe in God with absolute certainty at rates similar to those seen among the previous generation a decade ago. “This suggests,” Pew says, “that some of the religious differences between younger and older Americans today are not entirely generational but result in part from people’s tendency to place greater emphasis on religion as they age.”

It is interesting that young people, who are less interested in religion, nonetheless recognize the formative power of religion on every culture. What kind of morality, however, will a denomination have whose members do not read the Bible regularly?

Paul admonished Timothy to “continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you have learned it” (2 Tim. 3:14). Timothy was to continue because he knew the foundation of his faith was nothing less than the inspired Word of God. “All scripture is inspired by God [literally, is ‘God-breathed’].” Scripture evinces the experiences, personalities, researches, and writing styles of its human authors, but fundamentally it comes from God; it is his very breath. As the Lord God breathed into Adam the

breath of life (Gen. 2:7), so the Holy Spirit breathed into the authors of Scripture the word of God, so that they wrote what God intended as they were “moved” or “carried along” by the Holy Spirit (2 Pet. 1:21). As a result, all of Scripture is inspired and “is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

It is lives based on Scripture, taught, corrected, and trained in the righteousness of God that will make the

***Lastly, that if the preceding scriptural and rational principles be steadfastly adhered to, the vigor and strictness of its discipline will contribute to the glory and happiness of any church. Since ecclesiastical discipline must be purely moral or spiritual in its object, and not attended with any civil effects, it can derive no force whatever but from its own justice, the approbation of an impartial public, and the countenance and blessing of the great Head of the Church universal.*** (F-3.0108)

We conclude this series on the Historical Principles of Church Order with a message on discipline. All of the preceding assumes and demonstrates the truth that there is only genuine freedom within boundaries. We are only free to be the disciples of Jesus Christ as we live under the discipline of the Word of God.

It bears repeating that *disciple* means *a learner* and that *discipline* is a regimen of study. A disciple, then, is one who maintains a course of study. No student can just make up the course as he goes or get by without any means of testing what he knows. There must be a syllabus which serves as the contract between the instructor and the student, outlining the requirements for the course and what must be successfully accomplished in order to pass.

Jesus said, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free” (John 8:31-32). Freedom is the ability to live according to our wishes within certain bounds. Freedom in our country is the ability we have to live as we wish within the framework of the laws of this land. Freedom is *not* doing whatever we want. That is not freedom—it is anarchy, chaos, ultimately leading to death and destruction as those with the greatest power lord it over those with less power to do whatever they wish.

Would I be free if I were able to drive as fast as I want down any road, but someone else driving just as fast might get ticketed? Hardly, because I would not know if I were or were not going to be stopped the next time I was speeding. Law cannot be applied with partiality. We all need the same law to apply to all equally so that we know what we’re allowed to do and not do.

The same goes for the “holy nation” which is the church (1 Pet. 2:9). It is the insistence on getting our own way, regardless of what Scripture and confession say, that

church powerful for good in our society. Denominational advocacy of that which stands counter to the clear teaching of Scripture has no such effect, but rather serves to make the church look uneasy with itself, its foundations, even its God. The church exists to change society by calling people to repentance, to change of heart and mind, so their lives may conform more and more to the gospel of Christ and to the freedom to follow his commands found in the work of the Spirit in our lives. Let us, then, be once more a people of the Book, with consciences captive to the Word.

has gutted the idea of “vigor and strictness of discipline” in this denomination and which has contributed to the very opposite of “the glory and happiness” of this church and which, of greatest concern, calls into further question “the countenance and blessing of the great Head of the Church universal.”

The apostle Paul wrote the pastoral epistles for the order and well-being of the church. In 1 Tim. 3:14-15 he says he has written “these instructions” so that “you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God.” The church is called the temple of the living God, but let us not assume that whatever goes by the name of “church” is the church, for it is not. The Reformers were clear that the true church was evinced in “the true preaching of the Word of God,” in “the right administration of the sacraments of Christ Jesus,” and in “ecclesiastical discipline uprightly ministered, as God’s Word prescribes, whereby vice is repressed and virtue nourished” (Scots Confession, chap. 18).

The church is God’s household—God is the parent, the one we are privileged to call “our Father” because of what Jesus Christ did in making atonement for our sins, so that by God’s grace we are through faith in him made children of God through adoption. The church belongs to God and Jesus is the head of the church. We cannot make the church what we want it to be in terms of changing the fundamental structure of faith and practice. The church can only and should only be reformed and reforming “according to the Word of God.” Those who think that changing the *Book of Order* and introducing subtle or ambiguous language somehow trumps the clear teaching of Scripture and confession are deceiving themselves and others. They are also standing in opposition to these Historic Principles of Church Order.

Imagine a household in which the child does not know what he is allowed to do. Would such a child be happy?

Hardly. That child is most secure and feels most loved where his parents abide by principles which they have established and made clear. They allow their child freedom to do what he pleases, provided he lives within those guidelines. When he fails to do so, he is disciplined, not out of anger, but out of love.

It is out of love that God disciplines us. Heb. 12:10 says, “[H]e disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share his holiness,” so that we may be whole, what we were meant to be before we were broken and divided by sin. God wants to restore us, but we, like the prodigal son, need to recognize we’ve gone astray and return to him. He has already made the greatest sacrifice so that we could be restored. We recall that regularly in the proclamation of the Word and in the sacraments, but what of the power of the Spirit to help us to turn from our errant ways and present ourselves as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God, to do his will?

The church can only be the pillar and bulwark of the truth “as long as it rests upon the rock Christ, and upon the foundation of the prophets and apostles. And it is no wonder if it errs, as often as it deserts him who alone is the truth” (Second Helvetic Confession, chap. 17). God has not left us to meander and grope about in the darkness and futility of our own way of thinking, alienated from the life of God because of ignorance and hardness of heart, abandoning ourselves to every kind of impurity (Eph. 4:17-19)—he was revealed in the flesh, vindicated as God by the Spirit, taken up in the

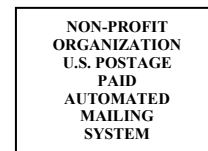
glory of resurrection, and is believed on throughout the world. The question is, what difference does that make to us and in us? Will we live as his disciples by following his word, by doing the will of the Father, by conforming our lives to the Word of God, or will we pay lip service to the Historic Principles of Church Order and yet deny them by following the ways of the world, the flesh, and even the devil?

The purpose of this series on the Historic Principles of Church Order has been to ask whether we are betraying in practice what we purport to be our foundations. These Principles were first drawn up by the Synod of New York and Philadelphia and prefixed to the Form of Government published by that body in 1788. They remain in our new Form of Government, but to what effect? Will the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) return to its first principles or will it continue to stray? How long will the great Head of the Church permit such impudence and insolence within his household? How long before the church which purports to be reformed instead finds itself so deformed that it is unrecognizable as the church, indistinguishable from the world? May we resolve that we will continue in the word of Christ, as his disciples, following the instructions he has left for us in his Word, seeking to show others him who is the Way, the Truth, and Life, the only hope for this world.

*The Rev. Dr. Randall Otto is Pastor of Green Hill Presbyterian Church in Wilmington, DE, and President of Theology Matters.*

The Rev. Dr. Randall Otto is President of Presbyterians for Faith, Family and Ministry (PFFM). Alan Wisdom is Interim Editor of *Theology Matters*. The Board of Directors of PFFM includes 10 people, clergy and lay, women and men. PFFM is working to restore the strength and integrity of the church's witness to Jesus Christ as the only Lord and Savior, by helping members develop a consistent Reformed Christian worldview. *Theology Matters* is sent free to anyone who requests it. Please donate today to this vital ministry. We can be contacted at [aewisdom@verizon.net](mailto:aewisdom@verizon.net), 703-300-5223, or [www.theologymatters.com](http://www.theologymatters.com).

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### Change Service Requested

We have great news for all who care about *Theology Matters*. A friend of the ministry has offered a matching grant of \$25,000 if we can raise an equal amount in new gifts. The purpose of this money will be to enable *Theology Matters* later this year to hire, for the first time in its history, a paid full-time executive director/editor. But we need to raise the matching amount by the end of summer. Would you help us meet that goal?

Our friend's act of generosity was as unprecedented as it was unexpected. We on the *Theology Matters* board received this offer as an answer to prayer, and we are happy to share it with you now. God is indeed providing for our needs. We are excited about the future of *Theology Matters* as he leads us forward.

In the meantime, we have a big challenge before us. We will need many partners to help us meet the matching grant challenge. Our prayer now is that the same Spirit that moved our friend to make his generous offer will move other friends to respond with equal generosity according to the means God has given each.

Meeting this challenge would make a big difference for *Theology Matters*. To this point the ministry has been carried out almost entirely by volunteers donating their time and energy. Above all, the Rev. Sue Cyre devoted 20 years to establishing and maintaining this unique publication. More than 10,000 readers agreed that we needed a voice that brought top scholars to engage theological issues that were vexing the church, yet in language that was accessible to people in the pews. That's the vital niche that *Theology Matters* has filled.

There is much more, however, that this ministry can and must do. In April our board met face-to-face for the first time since Sue's retirement. We sketched out a vision of how the ministry might be advanced: A new look for this print journal. Taking fuller advantage of our

website's capabilities. Expanding our pool of authors with rising younger scholars.

Many of these changes won't require a lot of money, but they will require a lot of labor. And we can't expect that labor to all be done by volunteers in their free time. We see the need for a paid full-time director/editor.

But how do we get to that point financially? That's where our friend's offer comes in. If we can gather gifts to match the \$25,000 that is on the table, we will have the resources to go out and find the person whom God may be calling to fill the need at *Theology Matters*.

Would you join us in meeting this challenge? Your gift now of \$50 or \$100 or more would double in value as it was matched by our generous friend. You can give online at [www.theologymatters.com](http://www.theologymatters.com), or you can mail your check to: Theology Matters, P.O. Box 3940, Fredericksburg, VA 22402.

Please include a notation that your donation is for our "matching fund." You can add this notation in the "note" box provided by Paypal or on the "memo" line of your check. Thank you for your faithful support.

*Theology Matters* is seeking writers for future issues. Among the forthcoming topics we plan to engage are: responding to "moralistic therapeutic deism," relationships between Presbyterians/Reformed and Jews, and biblical perspectives on immigration. Authors may submit manuscripts or proposals to Alan Wisdom at [aewisdom@verizon.net](mailto:aewisdom@verizon.net).