

To know it is to love it!
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The Church

*The church is Christ together with his people
called both to worship and to serve him in all of life. (Living Faith 7.1.1)*

This affirmation from *Living Faith* is a fitting context in which to set a consideration of our church polity. It is fitting, because it affirms that Jesus Christ is central to our understanding of the church, and also that people, real live people, are called by him to worship and serve. How we do that, how we worship and serve Jesus Christ, is our polity. It is, of course, also our mission, but the way we order our life together as a church is important to place in this dual context: First, our polity is always subordinate to Jesus Christ himself. Second, we are called into the church to act, to serve, and we have always understood that must be done in a certain way and within certain parameters. Those ways and parameters are our polity.

If Presbyterians have one thing they can call distinctive about themselves, it is their polity. The very word Presbyterian is a description of how we govern ourselves. Presbyterians must therefore believe that our government is pretty important. It behooves us, if we are going to know who we are as Presbyterians, to know something about that government.

And *to know it is to love it!* Our polity, which is one among many in the worldwide church, (one that we hold to be acceptable to scripture) is a gift from God to the church. The Book of Forms is never a tool to use to win an argument or a particular motion, but rather a guide to help us order our lives together as the community of faith. Our polity is an act of grace for the benefit of our life together as one branch of Christ's church.

This section of the Clerks handbook contains articles that will be useful to you as a clerk both in understanding and celebrating some of the fundamental bases of our polity, and in holding up the spirit of our polity for the benefit of those you serve as an officer of our courts.

Church Polity as an Expression of Our Theology
By Rev. Dr. Tony Plomp
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There's a cartoon in an old copy of MAD Magazine I came across some time ago. It shows, in series of frames, an office secretary admiring her boss' sense of order, his calm and confident appearance. She looks puzzled. "His business is failing," she says, "His world is collapsing around him, and yet he walks straight, with his head held high."

"Yes", agrees another office-worker in the next frame. "He's a man of steel, a tower of strength."

The final frame shows the boss in his closed office, crying for his mommy!

Well, we as Clerks of Presbyteries and Synods, often act out a similar scenario. We appear calm and confident and knowledgeable, towers of strength in the courts of the church as we firmly dispense our legal counsel on contentious issues. Then we close our office door and phone Earle Roberts! (Note: Earle Roberts was Principal Clerk of the General Assembly from 1982 - 1992.)

What Earle does, I don't know, but he probably prays to the Lord!

Now one reason we're here today is to give some content to our confidence, to help us deal with difficult issues, and to lessen, even if ever so slightly, the demands on Earle's time.

Why do we do things the way we do them? That's the question for our session today.

I noticed a sign in a Manager's office recently which read, "There's no reason. It's just company policy." I suppose not a few Presbyterians operate on that same principle. We do things the way we do them simply because it has always been done this way. We seldom, if ever, examine the roots of our church polity. Others, of course, cavalierly dismiss the whole Presbyterian exercise as dead tradition which may be blithely ignored. I know of one congregation where the members of Session laugh scornfully when the Minister refers to the Book of Forms.

I believe we need to recapture a thorough understanding of the rationale for "our way of doing things". I believe we need to make it more widely-known to our larger membership. I believe we need to correct the fallacy which some seem to hold that our form of church government somehow descended from heaven like the New Jerusalem, or was carefully devised to make the life of congregations miserable! In our society, ignorant of and disinterested in history, we somehow need to convey the fact that our form of church government is the result of hundreds of years of hard work and struggle. We need to convey that people sacrificed and even died for some of the principles enshrined in the Book of Forms. We need to convey that it is the result of the guidance and ever-renewing power of the Holy Spirit, and of the application from time to time of a healthy dose of good common sense to meet changing conditions. More importantly, we need to convey that our church polity arises out of our understanding of the nature of the Gospel. It has theological foundations. It is shaped by certain fundamental convictions derived from a Reformed reading of Scripture, enabling us therefore to say with some confidence that our church polity is "founded upon and agreeable unto the Word of God."

Stating this conviction leads, of course, to the question, "What about all the other forms of church government we find within the church universal?" Are they unscriptural? Is ours to be normative? I mean Lutherans, Baptists, Anglicans, Roman Catholics surely all believe their polity to be "founded upon...the Word of God". Even within the reformed community of churches there are "variations on the theme". Some branches of the Dutch Reformed Church, for instance, tend to be somewhat more congregationalist than we have been historically.

I don't want to spend too much time on such questions except to say that even though our system is Scriptural it is not necessarily normative. In many respects we may regard it as superior to others. In some respects inferior. But each denominational polity is derived from that church's specific history and theological reflection. We can only criticize it if, at its heart and in its practice, it denies the fundamental truths of the Gospel. All we can say with some assurance is that certain fundamental affirmations of the Reformed faith find expression in our church's government.

As an example let me cite our emphasis on parity and the need for "checks and balances", or "countervailing forces". Why do we stress that so much? Why do we lock our car-doors in the parking lot? We believe in original sin! We rightly shrink at the inane comment offered to us by well-meaning folk, "If you can't trust a minister, who can you trust?" Well, we know we can't be trusted, particularly with power and especially with absolute power. We know that no one person contains all truth and wisdom within himself or herself. We know we are fallible, even if we are well-meaning. We need, on occasion, the refreshing put-down I received from an older colleague some decades ago. Said he, after I had made some arrogant pronouncement, "What do you think you are? You're only a Clerk!" That was much more palatable than the angry outburst of another disturbed colleague who slammed his papers at my feet in the front of the Court and said, "Mr. Clerk! Go to hell!"

So, there is a straight line between our theology and polity, although sometimes I wish that point weren't so forcefully made!

Our theology, of course, has to be true to the witness of Scripture. And so, when it came to the reformation of the polity of the church, a man like John Calvin turned to the Scriptures and in particular to the witness of the New Testament Church. He wanted to go back to the purity of its life and witness. It was an attempt to "start all over again". Indeed, when I grew up in Holland, I recall my father telling me that Reformed Church doctrine and government were but the contemporary incarnation of the New Testament Church! I grew up believing all those folk back then were, much like us, fine, upstanding Presbyterians!

If only it were that simple. The reason we shy away from calling our church polity "normative" is precisely because of the fact that the New Testament does not provide us with a blue-print for church government, a single ordered pattern. All it provides us are certain criteria.

What are these criteria?

First, the New Testament makes it clear that there is a need for some kind of form, some order of life, for the church. As R. N. Flew has pointed out, "If the Church is a visible society of (people), it cannot dispense with some kind of form, with some rules, however loosely framed, some generally received order of life which controls action in cases of perplexity." ("Jesus and his Church", 1938). Calvin said in this regard, "No organization is sufficiently strong unless constituted with definite laws; nor can any procedure be maintained without some set form." The Council of Jerusalem, which sorted out the conflict between Jewish and Gentile Christians,

is an example of the need for certain mutually-agreed upon rules to guide the life and witness of the church. Again, theologically, Scripture reveals that the Lord of Creation abhors chaos. God is the God of order. So also the sovereignty of God in Christ has to be revealed in the manner in which the Church orders its life.

The second thing to note is that the order of church life in the New Testament was not set in concrete. It allowed for creativity and spontaneity and was constantly evolving to adapt itself to changing conditions in order to properly fulfill the main tasks committed to it, that is, the tasks of nurture and mission. There was no hardening of the theological nor structural arteries. An example of this is recorded for us in Acts 6:1-6, where Deacons were chosen to meet a new situation in church life. The Church is a living organism, a fellowship of mutual service and helpfulness. Its life together is to "equip the saints for the work of ministering and building up of the body of Christ." And so, then as now, the leadership and organization of the church is to be ultimately judged by the measure in which these contribute to that goal. Our bond of union is our service to the one Lord and the goal of the Church is to attain the fullest spiritual maturity. To achieve this goal all its members are encouraged to employ their various gifts. There is indeed a "priesthood of all believers".

This raises the question, of course, about our insistence on the need for a special order of ministry guided by the Spirit. Paul, in some of his correspondence, recognized this need. It is true that every member is called to mission and service, but within that general ministry there is to be leadership, a leadership distributed to various officers, among whom are the elders, to carry on a teaching and ruling ministry. They are to be, in the words of Scripture, "undershepherds of the sheep", especially equipped to teach and to guide God's people in the ways of Christ.

But, thirdly, and most significantly of all, the New Testament Church knew itself to be a society called into being by the direct act of God in Christ. Without Christ there is no Church. It is completely dependent upon him. He is its King and Head. As the letter to the Ephesians points out, "In putting everything under his feet, God constituted Christ head of the church." (1:22) He is, as has been said, "as the indispensable ruler who dominates, as the life that quickens, as the lord who protects, as the will that directs, and as the leader that nourishes the body."

And so, a critical New Testament insight is that the Church is not ruled from below by its members. It is ruled from above by Christ. It is a "Christocracy", and not primarily a representative democracy. This is so important. Many of the questions I get for my column in the Record protest at actions of the church which appear not to be "democratic", which fly in the face of the popular notion that the will of the people is the will of God. But, as Karl Barth has said, "True church law arises from hearing the voice of Jesus Christ as attested in Holy Scripture." He adds, "Christ is the living law of the Church." And so church order is not just of our own devising, at our convenience. Rather, it is divinely ordained for the governing of the Church according to God's will in a fallen world. Christ, and he alone, by his Spirit constitutes, directs, criticizes, and corrects the Church. Our task is to always diligently search for the will of Christ in how we order our life together.

Let me review the fundamental criteria revealed in the New Testament. These are:

1. The clear need for some form of church government.

2. The recognition that this form must be sufficiently flexible to meet new needs and changing conditions, allowing for and encouraging the fullest employment of the gifts of all God's people.
3. The need for our ordered life together to be in conformity with and in faithfulness to Christ, the Church's King and Head.

A second fundamental affirmation of the reformed faith is that we are, as Church, "a people of the Covenant." How important such an understanding is especially today when we live in such dreadful isolation from each other. We are a "Covenant People". Again, this Covenantal relationship does not arise from ourselves. Its origin lies in the heart of God. God took the initiative in calling out a people for himself through Abraham and Sarah. God called Moses and gave him the Law. God constantly moved outward from himself to draw people to himself, coming to us finally and fully in Christ. God is, in Christ, as the preamble to the ordination questions puts it, "the Minister of the covenant of grace". It is by God's Word and Spirit that the Church is gathered.

What is important here is, of course, the emphasis on God's initiative in calling us to himself. There is no question that he calls individuals. As Scripture puts it, God called us from "before the foundations of the earth". We are sought before we are even conscious that there is a God who seeks. Yet equally important is that God calls us out of our isolation into community. For all sorts of reasons people might want to walk the road of faith alone, and many try to do so. It is always a dead-end road. The Christian life is always "life together". There is a community into which we must be ingrafted or we die. We are to be a "connected" people, having brothers and sisters not only locally, but also throughout the world, linked in a fellowship of love with all who name the name of Christ. Although we may fall into the error of becoming parochial and congregationalist, in the long run this is an impossibility for Christians. Even those who share a more congregationalist form of church government would share such convictions.

Well, you may respond, paraphrasing Sherlock Holmes, "Elementary, my dear Mr. Plomp." Surely this is a view shared by most other Christians! True enough. Yet I sense Reformed and Presbyterian Churches have allowed that conviction to shape their life together in a very special and particular way.

Let me give you an example. I talked to a younger colleague recently who complained about having to attend so many meetings of a certain Presbytery committee. He regarded it as a waste of time. I agree, sometimes it is. Some of us find it so frustrating that we try to become "one-person" committees. "If you want to get anything done, you have to do it yourself." "The best committee is a committee of three with one member sick and the other on holidays." We rail against the delays caused by having to "go through Presbytery" and "through Synod" and "through General Assembly". How sweet it would be, we often muse, if we didn't have to spend all this wearying time with those "other people" who are so confused and who don't think straight. How wonderful if we, with our superior wisdom, could make decision unilaterally and independently. We long for a "bishop", if only we could be that bishop!

Some Presbyters try to do so. The result has almost always been disaster. It ended in disaster because we are a people called to be together, called to make decisions together, called to work together, believing that through such communal activity, subject to the Word of God, God's Spirit speaks to us and guides us and directs us.

We are called together by Christ as God's covenant people and within that community we are to share in a ministry to the world. This understanding, and ordering, of the Church certainly meets New Testament criteria. We must cultivate and structure ourselves as a community to recognize mutuality of service. This is why "parity" of ministry must be taken so seriously, particularly in the church courts, as well as the calling of church officers, such as elders. Unfortunately, we have become a clergy-dominated church to which all Assemblies, most Presbytery meetings, and some congregations, testify. Do we actively encourage the gifts of all the people? Do we in fact encourage mutuality of service? You know, we keep passing "affirmative action" motions in Assembly to encourage youth to participate in the life of the church. But these are quite useless, in my opinion, and counter-productive, unless from the very beginning we involve our young people from earliest age on in our congregational life and worship. And that's much harder, requires far more work, than passing "motherhood" motions in Assembly.

This mutuality, in which emphasis is on the cultivation of our various gifts and their use in ministry, must be exercised in love. For love is the key. As Calvin has noted, this means limiting our liberty in the face of the demands of love. It means emphasizing our responsibilities. It means being what we always talk about at such great length in our pulpits: servants, for servanthood is the practice of the kind of sacrificial love we proclaim in the Church. It is "the law" of Christ, in which we seek to bear each others' burdens rather than demand our rights.

But in a world in which individual rights often take precedence over communal rights, how do we foster an understanding of this? I have been told that conflicts between ministers and congregations are reaching epidemic proportions in the United States. Ministers are standing on their "rights" and congregations are standing on their "rights". Yet the fact is that our church polity is not designed to protect individual rights so much as it has been devised to promote precisely such mutual responsibility.

When conflicts arise people will, of course, appeal to "the Law" and, in many cases, rightly so. We as Church, as God's Covenant People, have been given, like the Covenant People of old, the gift of the Law. In the Old Testament dispensation the Law was seen as the revelation of the love of God. The law was given to make communal life more just and humane. Its intent was to enhance the life of the people of God so that they might live at peace with God and with each other. Its intent was "shalom", in which all constituent parts of life came together, under God, in splendid harmony.

Of course, that was the ideal. In practice, fallible people, which means, all people transgressed it. It also became a means to seek righteousness with God, a means for individual and institutional self-justification, a means to manipulate others and exercise control. The law, therefore, became a tool for cursing and not for blessing. The law grew into thousands of petty rules and regulations, a terrible burden, as Jesus said, upon the people. The "i's" were dotted and the "t's" were crossed but the spirit had been lost along the way.

It was against such a spirit, which also afflicted the church during the time of the Reformation, (and can afflict us at all times and in all places), that Martin Luther girded his loins for battle. Luther came to have a very low view of the law, to the point of wanting to expel the letter of James from the canon, calling it an "epistle of straw". Worse, he ordered a series of pulpit decorations in one of his churches in which Jews were portrayed as suckling on a pig, the pig being the Law!

John Calvin had a more positive view. The God of the universe hates chaos. Chaos cannot endure where God is present. Indeed, God's sovereignty is exhibited both in the order of creation as it is in God's work of salvation. Thus, Calvin saw the law as grace. It was a means to an end, the end being the harmonious life of the people of God together. The order of law provided the environment in which people could grow together in love and peace. The substance of that law was what he called "the rule of charity", that is, the law of Christ.

So, we Reformed and Presbyterian Christians take the law seriously. For that reason order and government have played a central place in the life of our churches. We want to do things, as the apostle Paul instructed, "decently and in order". Indeed, the very name of our denomination says as much, possibly the only church known by its form of government, government by elders. It may at times colour us "plodding" or even "boring". It may at times seem to quench the Spirit. It most certainly means a slower reaction time to the fads and fashions, and the crises of the moment. Yet, I believe it has served us well in the past and only more recently has caused us problems precisely because many of our folk have become legalists, majoring in their rights rather than in their mutual responsibilities. Many in the church have allowed the spirit of the world to encroach and will now protest and appeal almost any matter at the drop of a hat.

The sense of law (and notice I use that phrase advisedly: sense of law) in our church is, of course, enshrined in the Book of Forms and various acts of Assembly. The Book of Forms is, however, not so much a book of law or a manual of operations as it is a guide to make Christian life in community possible. Treat it like a book of law and it may well be full of loopholes and in many ways inadequate. Treat it like the guide it was, in my opinion, meant to be and it becomes a liberating document: a gift handed down over the generations to enable us to live an orderly and peaceful life together. (A lawyer friend of mine to whom I gave the Book of Forms to read responded, "Hey, this is great stuff.") Treat it like a book of law, of rules and regulations, and it becomes a tool with which we may try to hammer each other into the ground. Treat it like a gift of grace and it becomes a tool for pastoral ministry amongst us. It is, as has been said, "a guide to the wise and a rule to the fool".

We have to learn that finally law cannot ultimately govern us, no matter how detailed that law may be, no matter how many inserts we prepare for the Book of Forms, trying, as we now do, to cover every eventuality. We need more than law. We need compassion and love and mutual forbearance and some good old-fashioned good will and common sense. As Eugene Osterhaven has noted in his book, "The Faith of the Church", compassion and church order go together, for without compassion, without love, church order becomes demonic.

Walter Brueggemann writes in this regard, "...A great danger and temptation in our modern culture is an unhealthy polarization – the tendency to choose up sides and to struggle for control... The church has frequently lived out of a stance of polarization: it is the assumption that we have some monopoly on truth and that those who disagree with us are surely wrong..." He then goes on to talk about an "ecumenical stance". "...By ecumenical I mean a way of functioning, a feeling about self and others and world which lets each one value who he is, which lets each one hold precious what is precious to him, but which also permits the other person to be who he intends to be and takes him seriously... it assumes that both parties have something to learn from each other, that both come prepared not to change the other, but to be changed, to be open, to receive new perspectives and new insight. In the context of the church, dialogue as a style of faith has not been so pervasive as now appears necessary." (Scripture and an Ecumenical Life-style). These words are important to mull over for as we face and live in an increasingly pluralistic church.

Brueggemann's comments seem to tie in with what I see as an unhealthy trend in our church. The Book of Forms is growing like topsy. Revision piles upon revision, and addition upon addition. I realize this may well be necessary to meet changing times and conditions. We do need to be adaptable, in the spirit of the New Testament Church. Our present Book of Forms, is, after all, the product of many changes over the centuries, reaching back to the Scottish experience and the First and Second Book of Disciplines.

Yet permit me a somewhat biased observation. I have the suspicion that we are trying to "cover all the bases", to pre-empt the danger of polarization by trying to tie up all the loose ends, and the very attempt to do so speaks volumes to me. We are, in my opinion, in danger of becoming legalists in which the first question is not, "What can we do to heal this breach or solve this problem?", or "What does the righteousness of Christ demand?" but "What precisely does the Book of Forms say?" More than once, as Clerk of Presbytery I have people 'phone me and ask me for "chapter and verse". They are not interested at all in placing that "chapter and verse" in context of the particular situation it addresses. All they are after is to use it in a contest of wills.

To recap. We are a people who seek to be true to the Scriptural witness in regards to church order. We are a "covenant people", called by God into community to live and work and minister together, guided by the gift of God's grace as expressed in his law, that is, the righteousness revealed in Christ.

This returns me to my earlier illustration. Both Luther and Calvin, in following Paul, pointed out that one of the functions of the law of God was to convict humanity of its sin. It is true, we have been justified by the redeeming work of God in Christ. But we still are subject to the consequences of human imperfection and sin.

Taking sin in human life seriously has, as I observed earlier, most certainly shaped our form of church government. First, we are profoundly aware that the church can make mistakes, that the church can sin, and that the church must constantly be reformed. As for the individual there is need for repeated repentance, so also for the church. Thus it was right that we rewrote the Book of Forms to include the fact that women can be called to the ordained ministry as teaching and ruling elders.

Secondly, because we take sin seriously we assume that all of us are subject to personal and selfish interests. So we have made very certain in our system that power and decision making are never vested in individuals acting alone. We even tend to give committees "power to act" with some reluctance. I am not surprised that a Standing Judicial Committee of Assembly is viewed with some suspicion. The minister's powers in the congregation are circumscribed and one of the glories of our system is that ministers are protected from the tyranny of the congregation and congregations from the tyranny of their minister. So, as Gray and Tucker point out in their book on Presbyterian Polity, "the conviction that sin is both real and inevitable has led Reformed Christians to the conclusion that the decisions which we make together will most often be better than the decisions which any of us could make individually." (Gray/Tucker, "Presbyterian Polity")

We are a "covenant people", seeking to base our ordered life together on the witness of Scripture, guided by the law of Christ, seeking to hear his voice, and, being aware of the frailty of our human nature, recognize the need for continual reformation.

But to what end?

The answer has already been given. "The Son of Man came to serve, not to be served." This is also the call of the Church. To recall John Calvin's comment, "Our bond of union is our service to the one Lord." Although we frequently pay more service to that with our lips than with our deeds, there is a profound recognition among us that we are not called to withdraw from the world, into a cozy "life together", but to enter and embrace that world as the theatre of God's activity. I call it a "holy worldliness". Those whom God has called are given grace not only to amend their lives but also the responsibility to serve God and others. We are called to do this individually. We are called to do this as congregations. But we are also called to do this as a "connectional", national church together.

Why is it that we work through the Boards and Committees of our Church? Why is it that, although we may support other missionary and service work individually or through congregations, we nevertheless stress the importance of supporting "Presbyterians Sharing"? We do so because we recognize that what is done by one is done in the name of all. We may fight over priorities and we may even question the wisdom of doing it this way. The fact remains that we do it precisely because we are who we are! We still seek to speak and act as one church in a world hungry for unity.

Finally, our polity is shaped by our understanding of God. This is, of course, the crux of the matter. Whatever faith affirmations we make flow from who we understand God to be and the nature of God's self-revelation.

We Presbyterians have rightly majored on the theme of God's sovereign grace. Sovereignty means total dominion, total control, unchecked authority. In the past such sovereignty was exercised by earthly rulers and some still try it in the present. When we apply the concept of sovereignty to God we recognize that God was not under any compulsion but rather freely chose to create the world and redeem humankind. Even more, God has created the world and saves individuals without assistance, not even from the individuals concerned.

If God is sovereign over both creation and human destiny, then God is likewise sovereign over the church. All authority in the church rightly belongs to God. All other authority is derivative and this means in practice that no individual, no group, no church, no Assembly can be invested with the kind of authority or honour which belongs to God alone. Thus there is a kind of healthy skepticism that runs throughout our system. A "Jim Jones" or "Peoples' Temple" notoriety may happen in another denomination. It is unlikely to happen amongst us precisely because of our belief that God alone is sovereign, that we are a sinful covenant people guided by law, that decisions are to be made together, and that anyone who claims some special vision from God needs to subject that experience to the judgement of God's Spirit operating within the community of faith. That is, thank God, the price we pay for being "boring", or "slow", and "plodding" and "deliberate"!

The sovereignty of God is acknowledged by us in our understanding that Christ alone is King and Head of the Church. Section 3 of the Book of Forms states that "the principles and practice of the Presbyterian Church are ... that Christ Jesus, our Lord, as the Head of His Church, has appointed its constitution, laws, ordinances and offices; that its government and discipline are to be administered according to His will as revealed in Holy Scripture, by officers chosen for their fitness, and duly set apart to their office; that these officers meet for deliberation and united action in Kirk-Sessions, Presbyteries, Synods and General Assemblies, and in such order that the organic unity of the Church is maintained in a hierarchy of courts (in contradistinction to a hierarchy of men); the authority of which courts is ministerial and declarative, announcing what Christ has revealed, and applying His law according to His direction."

The understanding that Christ is King and Head of the Church means that he is, in the words of the Preamble to the Ordination Questions, our "Prophet, Priest, and King". As Prophet, he is the one who, in the word of Brueggemann "listens rather than one who speaks". He is the one who listens to the life of the people as he listens to the voice of God. So we also are to listen to the life of the people of God, to each other, and to the voice of God.

As Priest he is the One who prays for us. So also we are to pray for each other. Although many folk mask it well, I have a sense that we clergy are sometimes a jealous lot. We envy the success of others in the work of ministry and become easily depressed about our own perceived failures – of which there are plenty, particularly today. Praying for each other and for our people is therefore so important because it brings us together before the throne of God. Here the strong give love to the weak and here the weak derive strength from the strong. Here we may rejoice in the work of ministry and bear each others burdens.

Finally, Christ is our King. He is the one who exercises wise rule. Thus our ruling within the church must be in the context of those who listen and who pray so that we may order our life together wisely and compassionately. The affirmation of the sovereignty of Christ, then, is finally an affirmation of his grace.

The Book of Forms: A Useful Guide
By Rev. Dr. Earle F. Roberts
Principal Clerk ~ 1982-1992
March 1994

At a recent meeting of the executive committee of the Presbytery of East Toronto of which I am a member, there was a letter from the General Assembly office informing presbytery that the latest edition of the *Book of Forms* is ready for distribution. Since I had been closely involved with this project, this announcement brought delight to me, and to a few dozen other people in our church. But I suppose the majority of Canadian Presbyterians know little about the *Book of Forms* and the role it plays in the life and practice of our church. However, the number of people using it appears to be increasing.

What status should be given to the *Book of Forms*? Some believe one ought to be able to find a detailed procedure in it for every situation that occurs and they become frustrated when they cannot find what they want it to say. At the other extreme, those who are free spirited see no need for regulations of any sort. Between these two groups are various shadings.

Following the establishment of The Presbyterian Church in Canada in 1875, by the uniting of several already existing Presbyterian Churches, the Assembly of 1879 adopted the *Book of Forms* as a useful guide for the office-bearers of the church. After the 1889 revision, Assembly resolved that the *Book of Forms* "be approved and adopted as a useful guide for the members, office-bearers and the courts of the church in the transaction of ecclesiastical business." The Assembly of 1932, in arranging for yet another revision, instructed that it be "a summary of approved practice of Presbyterian churches, supplemented by specific regulations enjoined by The Presbyterian Church in Canada from time to time, and as a guide to office-bearers of the church in all ordinary matters, and as setting forth the law of the church." And, thus, it is today.

Unfortunately, some of today's new interest in the *Book of Forms* comes from individuals pursuing their "rights". I strongly believe justice must not only be done but must also be perceived to be done in the church. The courts of the church must act with the greatest care when called upon to exercise discipline, but they should never hesitate to discipline when the need arises. While the *Book of Forms* may not be perfect in the sections on discipline, it is vital that the courts of the church follow the procedures laid down for dealing with such matters as closely as possible.

But what are "my rights"? There are different ways to look at this question. Human rights groups have their code; the civil courts have theirs. What about the church? How do I protect "my rights" in the church?

Before God, does the Christian have any "rights"? I believe the answer is no. The Bible teaches a different philosophy than that practiced by so many today. The words from Christ's sermon recorded in Matthew (5:38-41, NRSV) are striking:

"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile."

More and more, congregations and the courts of the church are getting caught in struggles that appear to be nothing more than one individual or group asserting his/her/their "rights" against those of another individual or group. Isn't it about time we stop this foolishness, take our eyes off ourselves and focus on God?