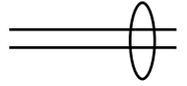


Theology of Polity – Law & Order

Session Starter Number 6



Prayer:

God of order and light, we open our hearts and minds to you in prayer. As we pray, think and speak together, keep before us the needs of this congregation and your precious people throughout the world Enable us, by the power of your spirit, to become agents of order and light as we reach out in the love of Christ Jesus. In his name we pray. Amen.

Introduction:

The Book of Forms is described in its preface as

“... a summary of the 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 the office-bearers of the church in all ordinary matters ... and as setting forth the law and practice of the church.”

The Book of Forms does not provide rules for every eventuality that may arise as we go about being the church. It does, however, lay down basic principles of impartial fairness that enables us to govern ourselves in an orderly and just way. This Session Starter focuses on the need for law and order.

Scripture: *(Invite an elder to read the following passage.)*

In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness God called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

Genesis 1:1-5

A Brief Commentary: *(Invite another elder to read the following commentary)*

The opening verses of Genesis remind us that God is a God who brings order out of chaos. A shadowy and formless void is transformed by the creative power of God. The darkness is measured and balanced by light as day and night follow each other. Beautiful and intricate life forms emerge. And it is good.

Reflection:

Law & Order is a long-running television drama series appearing on NBC. Each week New York City crimes are investigated, suspects are apprehended and the accused are prosecuted. Whatever you think of the program, we all know that law is needed if any kind of order is to follow. Can you imagine what it would be like

if there were no traffic laws? Imagine trying to get about in an automobile if there were no speed limits, no stops signs, no traffic lights, no driving lanes. The resulting chaos is almost unimaginable. In a similar way, the church needs laws to help us travel in an orderly, consistent, fair and compassionate manner.

Sometimes at a session meeting, in the midst of a debate, an elder might ask, “Well, what does the Book of Forms say about this?” Eyes may roll. Another elder might mutter, “Who cares?” These sentiments are expressed by those who believe the Book of Forms is designed to make church life miserable. In reality, it has been crafted over many years by devoted and thoughtful people and adopted by General Assemblies for the purpose of making Christian life in community possible. When sessions understand the legislation and the justice of the legislation, there may be a greater appreciation for the blessing of legislation.

Very often sessions and congregations find themselves mired in shadowing voids of chaos simply because they did not follow the direction of the Book of Forms. The laws of the church are designed to help us to carry out the ministry of Jesus Christ in a way that truly blesses the whole people of God.

Climbing down Mount Sinai with tablets of stone tucked under his arm, Moses reminds us that our God is a law-giving God (Exodus 20). The Apostle Paul, scratching out a letter to the Corinthians, reminds us that the church is called to carry out the ministry of Christ decently and in order, a favourite Presbyterian phrase (1 Corinthians 14:40). God’s people are called to live together in ways that are pleasing to our creator. The Book of Forms helps us achieve this lofty goal. It is a guide for a denomination that seeks to be true to scripture in relation to the way we function as a church.

Whether your session is discussing the calling of a minister, the election of elders, the recording of session minutes, or any other matter, it is important to know the content of the Book of Forms. The Book of Forms has 451 sections in it and can be a bit daunting. Please feel free to contact the General Assembly Office if you ever need help sorting through our legislation.

This might be an appropriate moment to note that because virtually every chapter of the Book of Forms has been impacted by the revised chapter on Judicial Process, it was reprinted in its entirety in

August, 2006. The Book Room at 50 Wynford Dr. can supply you with a new binder cover and pages (\$10.00) or just the pages (\$5.00) that can be inserted into your old binder.



Follow-up Questions:

1. Describe a time when the session became mired in chaos by not following the Book of Forms?
2. Describe a time when the session found the Book of Forms to be particularly helpful?