

OUR BOND OF UNION

A Commentary on the
*Book of Church Order of the
Presbyterian Church in America*

By
C. S. Per Almquist





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GENERAL PRINCIPLES FOR THE INTERPRETATION OF THE *BOOK OF CHURCH ORDER*

The temptation is to use the *Book of Church Order of the Presbyterian Church in America (BCO)* as either an instruction manual or a code of laws for the Church. There is a powerful kernel of truth to it; the *BCO* does instruct. It does give the necessary steps to follow in certain situations and for specific actions. It does direct what must be done for the governance of the Church.¹ It is a resource to be consulted, respected, and followed.

However, the *BCO* is not an amalgamation of disparate rules, directives, and statutes covering every detail of church government. Instead, it presents a system of principles of church government. Each component is but a part of the whole. Each needs to be understood in its context as a part of that whole. F. P. Ramsay warns,

To undertake to direct the activities of this organization, our church organized for government and discipline upon this system of principles, without an intelligent comprehension of these principles in their relation to each other as a complete system, is sure to result in clash and confusion; and it will be still worse to undertake to amend parts without first comprehending the relation of the parts as a whole.²

Approaching the *BCO* as nothing more than a compilation of details and procedures for specific situations will lead to a misapplication of the provisions included, even though they are accurate to the letter of the law. Only when each provision is understood in the context of the whole system is the church genuinely living as it should. Don MacNair succinctly states four basic principles for interpreting and using the *BCO* that embody this understanding.³

1. Where specific matters are addressed in detail, follow these step by step. Presbytery's minutes should include a complete and detailed record of this careful adherence.
2. When specific details are not given, follow principles established by analogy. When circumstances are comparable in significant respects, the provisions of the *BCO* for

1 This work will use Church (capitalized) to refer to the universal Church and church (lowercase) to refer to all particular churches or denominations (e.g., the PCA, a local church, etc.)

2 F. P. Ramsay was a minister in the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS), the church from which the PCA later came, who wrote an exposition of the *Book of Church Order* in the late 19th century. It is still relevant and useful as much of the BCO of his day is retained in the PCA's *Book of Church Order*. F. P. Ramsay, *An Exposition of the Form of Government and the Rules of Discipline of the Presbyterian Church in the United States* (The Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1898), 7.

3 Donald J. MacNair, *A Practical Guide to the Book of Church Order of the Presbyterian Church in America* (Committee for Christian Education & Publications, 1995), 8.

one situation should be applied to the other as far as reasonable. *BCO* 34-10 explicitly states this. Though the paragraph deals with divesting a teaching elder, it concludes, “This principle may apply, with any necessary changes, to ruling elders and deacons.”

3. When the *BCO* does not address a matter, each court may use discretion. The *BCO* is intended to speak only when necessary. When it does speak, it is authoritative. When it does not speak, it is not a prohibition. In other words, it is prescriptive (laying out what is required), not proscriptive (forbidding anything not explicitly permitted by it). For example, the *BCO* is intentionally silent on the issue of terms of service for officers for the express purpose that each congregation be free to determine whether its officers rotate or serve indefinitely.⁴
4. Leave decisions to the lowest court possible. The higher courts have only that authority given to them by the Constitution of the Church.⁵ Even in exercising that authority, higher courts should ordinarily exhibit great deference to lower courts (see *BCO* 39-3). As it is commonly put, the PCA is a grassroots denomination.

To these principles needs to be added one more:

The general rule of interpretation of the *BCO* is that no provision can be properly interpreted if it conflicts with any of the Preliminary Principles. Thus, if a *BCO* provision is interpreted so that it conflicts with a Preliminary Principle, such interpretation is erroneous. Every interpretation of the *BCO* after the Preliminary Principles in the Preface must be consistent with such Preliminary Principles—otherwise the interpretation is in error.⁶

And one note on language: it is often said that in the *BCO*, “shall” or “must” indicate a mandated provision. “Should” indicates something strongly recommended. “May” signifies a permissible provision. Thus, only “shall” or “must” is required. Though often cited, this interpretive rule has never been adopted by the PCA or enshrined in its governing documents. David Coffin argues that the *BCO* regularly uses “should” in the sense of expressing

4 “BCO Monopolizes Assembly Attention,” *Presbyterian Journal* 32, no. 34 (19 December 1973): 5. Kennedy Smartt, *I Am Reminded: An Autobiographical, Anecdotal History of the Presbyterian Church in America*, 25th anniversary ed. (M. Smartt, 1998), 108-109.

5 *BCO* 11-4, “The jurisdiction of these courts is limited by the express provisions of the Constitution.”

6 Case 2000-9: *Complaint of TE Sung Keon Kim vs. Korean Capital Presbytery*, M30GA, 112. A note on General Assembly minutes: These are typically cited as MxGA, year, docket number or appendix, subsection (if applicable), page numbers. Thus, M1GA, 1973, 1-32, 32 refers to the *Minutes of the First General Assembly* held in 1973, item 1-32, on page 32. Cases are cited by case number and name, then the *Minutes of the General Assembly* and page number.

an order, obligation, or instruction. He suggests a helpful test: replacing “should” with “most often” to see if it still preserves the sense of the rule.⁷

The purpose of church government is for the people of God to be the body of Christ in this world. It is God’s instrument for His glory. In applying the principles, processes, and procedures of the *Book of Church Order*, the Church must not forget this. “It is not constitutional regularity, it is not mechanical perfection, that makes the church efficient for its end; it is the Spirit of Christ using the church as his agent.”⁸ There is no more important principle to keep in mind in approaching the *BCO*.

⁷ Case 2020-05: *TE Ryan Speck vs. Missouri Presbytery*, M49GA, 2022, 859-863.

⁸ Ramsay, *Exposition*, 10.

Preface: I. The King and Head of the Church

Jesus Christ, upon whose shoulders the government rests, whose name is called Wonderful, Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace; of the increase of whose government and peace there shall be no end; who sits upon the throne of David, and upon His kingdom to order it and to establish it with judgment and justice from henceforth, even forever (Isaiah 9:6-7); having all power given unto Him in heaven and in earth by the Father, who raised Him from the dead and set Him at His own right hand, far above all principality and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come, and has put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be the Head over all things to the Church, which is His body, the fullness of Him that filleth all in all (Ephesians 1:20-23); He, being ascended up far above all heavens, that He might fill all things, received gifts for His Church, and gave all offices necessary for the edification of His Church and the perfecting of His saints (Ephesians 4:10-13).

Jesus, the Mediator, the sole Priest, Prophet, King, Saviour, and Head of the Church, contains in Himself, by way of eminency, all the offices in His Church, and has many of their names attributed to Him in the Scriptures. He is Apostle, Teacher, Pastor, Minister, Bishop and the only Lawgiver in Zion.

It belongs to His Majesty from His throne of glory to rule and teach the Church through His Word and Spirit by the ministry of men; thus mediately exercising His own authority and enforcing His own laws, unto the edification and establishment of His Kingdom.

Christ, as King, has given to His Church officers, oracles and ordinances; and especially has He ordained therein His system of doctrine, government, discipline and worship, all of which are either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary inference may be deduced therefrom; and to which things He commands that nothing be added, and that from them naught be taken away.

Since the ascension of Jesus Christ to heaven, He is present with the Church by His Word and Spirit, and the benefits of all His offices are effectually applied by the Holy Ghost.⁹

The kingship of Christ is the foundational principle of Presbyterian polity. The headship

9 See Ramsay, *Exposition*, 18-22; and Morton H. Smith, *Commentary on the Book of Church Order of the Presbyterian Church in America*, 6th ed. (Presbyterian Press, 2007), 15-18. For a more in-depth exploration of the scriptural foundations of this principle, see chapter two of C. S. Per Almquist, “Presbyterian Polity in Practice: A Commentary on the *Book of Church Order* of the Presbyterian Church in America” (DMin diss., Reformed Theological Seminary, 2023), 24-46.

of Christ underlies and overarches the entire system of church government. “This principle is beyond dispute, but needs to be remembered in every context.... [Elders in the Church of Jesus Christ] are to function always and only in the framework of the principles regarding church government given by Christ in no other place than Scripture itself.”¹⁰

The language of the first paragraph of the preface is lifted entirely from Scripture and presents Jesus Christ as the King and Head of the Church. The second and third paragraphs declare His offices. The fourth tells how He equips His Church—that officers and the system of government He has decreed are the gifts of the King to His people. The final paragraph points out the nature and method of His activity—that He is ever active in His Church by His living presence through human media.

The opening paragraph first appeared as the preface to The Form of Presbyterial Church Government, written by the Westminster Assembly in the 1640s.¹¹ This paragraph has been the Presbyterian Church’s recognized foundation since it was first formally adopted by an Assembly of the Church of Scotland on February 10, 1645. The rest of the paragraphs were added as part of the revision of 1879, where the whole section appears as chapter two of the Form of Government.

The Orthodox Presbyterian Church’s (OPC’s) *Book of Church Order* includes the first paragraph as the opening paragraph of chapter one of their “Form of Government.” The remainder of that chapter conveys many of the same concepts as the rest of this section, using similar but not identical language. Alan Strange has provided an exposition of the OPC’s language in their periodical, *Ordained Servant*.¹²

10 *M14GA*, 1986, Appendix P, 427. See n.5 above on how the Minutes of General Assembly are referenced.

11 David W. Hall and Joseph H. Hall, eds., *Paradigms in Polity: Classic Readings in Reformed and Presbyterian Church Government* (William B. Eerdmans, 1994), 260-277.

12 Alan D. Strange, “Commentary on the Form of Government of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, Chapters 1–2,” *Ordained Servant* 29 (June-July 2020), https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=829.

Preface: II. Preliminary Principles

The Presbyterian Church in America, in setting forth the form of government founded upon and agreeable to the Word of God, reiterates the following great principles which have governed the formation of the plan:

The eight principles that follow underlie and shape the Constitution of the PCA. These are the working out of the PCA's understanding of the nature of the Church in the actual life of the Church.¹³ Every provision of the *BCO* must be interpreted and applied in conformity to these principles. All eight principles fit together under the headship of Christ to form the foundation for the system of government used by the PCA.

Approved by the Synod of New York and Philadelphia in 1788, when drafting the initial *Book of Church Order* for Presbyterians in the Americas as it prepared to transition to a General Assembly, tradition holds that John Witherspoon wrote these principles.¹⁴ Over 200 years later, they continue to be a fundamental part of the government of the church.¹⁵

Liberty of Conscience

*1. God alone is Lord of the conscience and has left it free from any doctrines or commandments of men (a) which are in any respect contrary to the Word of God, or (b) which, in regard to matters of faith and worship, are not governed by the Word of God. Therefore, the rights of private judgment in all matters that respect religion are universal and inalienable. No religious constitution should be supported by the civil power further than may be necessary for protection and security equal and common to all others.*¹⁶

13 Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), "Report of the Special Committee on Historical Principles, Conscience, and Church Government," (Office of the General Assembly, 1983), https://www.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/_resolutions/historic-principles.pdf, 6.

14 Witherspoon was the president of the College of New Jersey (now Princeton University) and the only ordained minister (and college president) to sign the Declaration of Independence. The Form of Government was written by a committee, but in a manuscript biography of Witherspoon, Ashbel Green asserts that Witherspoon was the sole author of the principles. Leonard J. Trinterud, *The Forming of an American Tradition* (Westminster Press, 1949), 292.

15 They form section F-3.01: Historic Principles of Church Order in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Part II: Book of Order 2019-2023* (The Office of the General Assembly, 2019), 11-13. In the following section, F-3.02, the PCUSA restates these historic principles. To wit: 1. One Church; 2. Governed by Presbyters; 3. Gathered in Councils; 4. Seek and Represent the Will of Christ; 5. Decision by Majority Vote; 6. Review and Control; 7. Ordination by Council; 8. Shared Power, Exercised Jointly; 9. General Authority of Councils.

16 See Smith, *Commentary*, 19-20. Responding to an overture to the first General Assembly, the Constitutional Documents committee began work on adding scriptural proof texts for the *BCO*. The Committee was dismissed by the sixth General Assembly without completing this assignment. The only portion of its work in this area that was presented to the Assembly (as an example of the work and never approved) were parts one and two of the preface (*M4GA*, 1976, Appendix J, 203-204). The proposed proof texts for principle one were Acts 5:29; James 4:12; and *WCF* 20.

The first principle set out is the liberty of conscience. First, the *BCO* reiterates what the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (*WCF*) declares in chapter 20, paragraph 2.¹⁷ Then it explains the outworking of the liberty of conscience. Finally, it separates religious matters from the control of the state.

Three relations concerning the individual's freedom and obligation in religion are set out: (1) his relation to God; (2) his relation to other people; (3) his relation to the civil authorities. In relation to God, the individual is completely and utterly responsible. God is the Lord of the conscience, the only One who may bind humanity in matters of faith and worship. He declares His will in His Word. People are not free to believe anything that they please. God has spoken, and every person is obligated to obey Him. Next, in relation to other people, a person is perfectly free. No other person has the right or authority to say what one must believe in any way that is contrary to or beside what God has revealed in Scripture. Finally, civil authorities have no power in matters of faith except to protect the individual's religious rights against any attempt to curtail their freedom.¹⁸

Christian liberty is the unrestrained submission to God's revealed will. However, there are limits to this liberty, for "the idea of Christian liberty is not that we are free to do or say or think whatever we can persuade our weak consciences to accept."¹⁹ Thus, this liberty does not permit one to "oppose any lawful power, or the lawful exercise of it, whether it be civil or ecclesiastical."²⁰ The *Confession* goes on to explain that God has ordained these authorities, so to oppose them in the lawful exercise of the power He has granted them is to oppose the ordinances of God. Since the liberty of the Christian is the freedom from sin so that they are now able to serve the Lord without fear, in holiness and righteousness,²¹ this liberty is not to hold opinions or practice anything contrary "to the light of nature, or to the known principles of Christianity (whether concerning faith, worship, or conversation), or to the power of godliness."²²

Despite the high view of the Church and respect for her elders, individuals are not bound to submit without hesitation to every decision of the Church. Each individual has the divine right and responsibility to test all things against Scripture.²³ This right of private judgment is "the liberty and obligation, which belong to every man, of examining the Word of God, and determining for himself its meaning."²⁴

17 "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, if matters of faith, or worship. So that, to believe such doctrines, or to obey such commands, out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience: and the requiring of an implicit faith, and an absolute and blind obedience, is to destroy liberty of conscience, and reason also."

18 David S. Kennedy, "Studies in Presbyterian Government," *The Presbyterian* 96, no. 42 (October 21, 1926): 9.

19 Chad Van Dixhoorn, *Confessing the Faith: A Reader's Guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith* (The Banner of Truth Trust, 2014), 266-267.

20 *Westminster Confession of Faith* (*WCF*), 20.4.

21 *WCF* 20.3.

22 *WCF* 20.4.

23 Smith, *Commentary*, 20.

24 J. Aspinwall Hodge, *What Is Presbyterian Law As Defined by the Church Courts?: With an Appendix Containing the Decisions of the General Assemblies of 1898 Inclusive*, 8th ed. (Presbyterian Board of Publication and Sabbath-School Work, 1914), 22.

This right is both individual and corporate. Christ's kingdom is not of this world as civil governments are (John 18:36). The duty of the civil government is to afford equal and common protection so that all may worship God according to their conscience and to ensure the Church's freedom to govern itself.²⁵

Terms of Admission

*2. In perfect consistency with the above principle, 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 has appointed. In the exercise of this right it may, notwithstanding, err in making the terms of communion either too lax or too narrow; yet even in this case, it does not infringe upon the liberty or the rights of others, but only makes an improper use of its own.*²⁶

Liberty of conscience means people are free to refuse to associate with an organization. Still, when they agree, they have the right and privilege to form a body based upon that agreement. Like every other organization, the Church has the right to declare the terms of membership in it. This principle does not make any statements on what those terms ought to be; it merely asserts the Church's right to set them.

Officers Appointed by Christ

*3. Our blessed Saviour, for the edification of the visible Church, which is His body, has appointed officers not only to preach the Gospel and administer the Sacraments, but also to exercise discipline for the preservation both of truth and duty. 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.*²⁷

25 WCF 23.3. William E. Moore, *The Presbyterian Digest of 1898: A Compend of the Acts, Decisions, and Deliverances of the General Presbytery, General Synod, and General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, 1706-1897* (Presbyterian Board of Publication and Sabbath-School Work, 1898), 154. For an explication of the WCF 23.3 as amended by the Synod in 1788 as it approved this principle, see Van Dixhoorn, *Confessing the Faith*, 311-318. In 1785, a committee of the Synod met with the Low Dutch Reformed Synod of New York and New Jersey and the Associate Reformed Synod and explained their view thus: "The Presbyterian Church in America considers the Church of Christ as a spiritual society, entirely distinct from the civil government, having a right to regulate their own ecclesiastical policy, independently of the interposition of the magistrate." Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., *Records of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, 1706-1788* (Arno Press & The New York Times, 1969), 519.

26 See Smith, *Commentary*, 20-21. The proposed proof texts were WCF 20 and 25 (M4GA, 1976, Appendix J, 203.).

27 See Smith, *Commentary*, 21. The proposed proof texts were Eph. 4:11-12; Matt. 16:19; and 1 Cor. 5:3-5 (M4GA, 1976, Appendix J, 203.).

Christ gives officers to the Church as His instruments. They fill positions that He has instituted, fulfilling the duties He has assigned. The authority of officers is derivative (from Christ's appointment), declarative (preaching the Word, making the Word visible and tangible by administering the sacraments, and exercising discipline according to the Word), and edifying (for the good of the Church).

Godliness Is Founded on Truth

4. Godliness is founded on truth. A test of truth is its power to promote holiness according to our Saviour's rule, "By their fruits ye shall know them" (Matthew 7:20). No opinion can be more pernicious or more absurd than that which brings truth and falsehood upon the same level.

On the contrary, 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.²⁸

The Second General Assembly rewrote the first two sentences of this principle, changing the wording without changing the meaning.²⁹ "Truth is the only source of goodness, and goodness is the fruit and test of truth."³⁰ Neither truth nor goodness alone is the Church's goal. Only as the Church maintains the truth may she fulfill her calling to be holy as her God is holy (1 Peter 1:13-21). She is to show her faith in the truth through her works (James 2:14-26), and her works are to be based upon the truth.

Teachers Must Be Sound in the Faith with Forbearance

5. While, under the conviction of the above principle, it is necessary to make effective provision that all who are admitted as teachers be sound in the faith, there are truths and forms with respect to which men of good character and principles may differ. In all these it is the duty both of private Christians and societies to exercise mutual forbearance toward each other.³¹

Because teachers are those who expound the truth and lead others into it, the Church

28 See Smith, *Commentary*, 21-22. The proposed proof texts were John 17:7; and Prov. 17:13, 15 (*M4GA*, 1976, Appendix J, 203).

29 *M2GA*, 1974, 2-70, 55. Smith, *Commentary*, 22.

30 Hodge, *What Is Presbyterian Law*, 25.

31 See Smith, *Commentary*, 22. The proposed proof texts were 2 Tim. 4:2-3; and Eph. 4:15, 25 (*M4GA*, 1976, Appendix J, 203).

must ensure that its teachers are sound in the faith. This is both a right and an obligation. Yet, it must also recognize that there is room for differences in some areas of truth. No attempt is made here to define the line between those two areas, only that the existence of both needs to be lovingly maintained.³² Hodge gives a needed reminder that this mutual forbearance is exercised by recognizing the Christian character and Church relation of others, by patiently teaching God's Word "more perfectly," and by maintaining and practicing the truth without either offense or judgment.³³

The Power to Elect

6. Though the character, qualifications and authority of church officers are laid down in the Holy Scriptures, as well as the proper method of officer investiture, the power to elect persons to the exercise of authority in any particular society resides in that society.³⁴

Scripture declares the requirements for office, but the recognition that any specific person is called to office in that particular church lies in the church. No officer can enter upon his office or duties save by the direct choice of the people over whom his authority is to be exercised.³⁵ Thus, no elder, ruling or teaching, or deacon may serve a particular church, even temporarily, without being voted upon by the members of that church.

Church Power Is Ministerial and Declarative

7. All church power, whether exercised by the body in general, or by representation, is only ministerial and declarative since the Holy Scriptures are the only rule of faith and practice. No church judicatory may make laws to bind the conscience. All church courts may err through human frailty, yet it rests upon them to uphold the laws of Scripture though this obligation be lodged with fallible men.³⁶

Jesus Christ is King and Head of the Church. He is the only lawgiver for His people and has revealed His law in Scripture. Therefore, the Church has no legislative power, no authority to make laws, or require of people certain beliefs or practices of its own devising. Its power is entirely ministerial (acting as an agent or instrument of God) and declarative

32 Smith, *Commentary*, 22.

33 Hodge, *What Is Presbyterian Law*, 26.

34 See Smith, *Commentary*, 22. The proposed proof texts were 1 Tim.3; and Acts 6:3 (*M4GA*, 1976, Appendix J, 203).

35 David S. Kennedy, "Studies in Presbyterian Polity," *The Presbyterian* 96, no. 44 (November 4, 1926): 9.

36 See Smith, *Commentary*, 23. The proposed proof texts were 1 Cor. 2:5; Eph. 2:20; Acts 17:11; and *WCF* 31 (*M4GA*, 1976, Appendix J, 204).

(proclaiming God's law revealed in Scripture). All its decisions must be founded upon the revealed will of God, and beyond Scripture, the Church cannot go. The laws of the Church are limited to explaining and applying the law revealed by Christ.³⁷

Historically, the power of the Church is spoken of as the power of the keys (Matt. 16 and 18). The power of the keys is two-fold: the key of doctrine and the key of discipline. The key of doctrine is the right application of the Word of God, primarily preaching the Word. The key of discipline is the exercise of church discipline: that is, to include into membership and office and, by its judicial act, to exclude an offender for a time—or permanently—from the outward privileges of the Church. “But beyond this the Church has no authority and no power,” and Bannerman goes on:

In the case of the key of doctrine, the office and duty of the Church are simply declarative, and no more,—having power to announce what, according to its own understanding of them, are the decisions of the Word of God, as applicable to the case in the way of absolving the repentant, and condemning the impenitent sinner; but having no power itself, and apart from the Divine sentence, to absolve or condemn. In the case of the key of discipline, the office and duty of the Church are simply ministerial,—having power to admit to or exclude from the outward privileges of the Christian society, according as it believes that Christ in His Word has admitted or excluded; but having no power itself to open or shut the door of the invisible Church, or to give or withhold admission to the favour of God.³⁸

Since they are composed of sinful men, Church courts make mistakes. Yet despite their fallibility, it is incumbent on Church courts to uphold the law of God to the best of their ability.

Ecclesiastical Discipline Must Be Purely Moral or Spiritual

*8. 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.*³⁹

³⁷ James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ: A Treatise on the Nature, Powers, Ordinances, Discipline, and Government of the Christian Church* (Banner of Truth Trust, 2015), 228.

³⁸ Bannerman, *Church of Christ*, 712-713.

³⁹ See Smith, *Commentary*, 23. This principle and the unnumbered concluding paragraph were originally combined (in the reverse order to how they currently appear). The proposed proof texts for the whole were Matt. 18:17-18; 1 Tim. 5:2; WCF 30 (M4GA, 1976, Appendix J, 204.).

The Church is God's steward on earth to administer His reign over man for his spiritual good.⁴⁰ It applies divine law and has no coercive authority to enforce that law. The symbol of power for parents is the rod, and for the state, it is the sword, both of which indicate authority to compel. In contrast, the symbol of the power of the Church is the keys, which have no power of compulsion, only inclusion or exclusion. The Church's discipline includes no human or earthly power. Its power comes from its agreement to Christ's revealed will, its own fairness and uprightness, and the world's general recognition of this justness.

If the preceding scriptural principles be steadfastly adhered to, the vigor and strictness of government and discipline, applied with pastoral prudence and Christian love, will contribute to the glory and well-being of the Church.

The goal of government and discipline is two-fold: the glory of God and the good of His Church. These can only be achieved through faithfulness to the King and Head of the Church and His revealed will for His people in Scripture.

40 Bannerman, *Church of Christ*, 233.

Preface: III. The Constitution Defined

*The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church in America, which is subject to and subordinate to the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, the inerrant Word Of God, consists of its doctrinal standards set forth in the Westminster Confession of Faith, together with the Larger and Shorter Catechisms, and the Book of Church Order, comprising the Form of Government, the Rules of Discipline and the Directory for Worship; all as adopted by the Church.*⁴¹

The authority structure delineated in the *BCO* is Scripture—the doctrinal standards of the Constitution (namely, the *Westminster Confession of Faith* together with the *Larger and Shorter Catechisms*)—the constitutional documents of church order (i.e., the *Book of Church Order*).⁴²

When speaking of this authority structure, Paul Gilchrist, the second Stated Clerk of the PCA, helpfully points out that the *BCO* appends the conscience as a meta-principle.⁴³ This is demonstrated by the first Preliminary Principle that governs the form of government and is given even before the Constitution is defined. Thus, the Constitution may not bind the conscience by requiring one to go either contrary to or beyond Scripture’s teaching.

The supreme authority in the Church is Scripture, for it alone is the inerrant and infallible Word of God.⁴⁴ It is not part of the Constitution of the Church. As the supreme authority and only infallible rule of faith and practice, Scripture has divine authority over all human documents, including the Constitution of the Church. The Constitution of the PCA, then, is this church’s understanding of what the Bible teaches in areas of faith and church life and serves as its bond of union.⁴⁵ To this end, the Constitution of the PCA is comprised of two documents: the doctrinal standards and documents of church order or government. These form the “only binding statement identifying” the PCA.⁴⁶ They are binding upon all members of the PCA. So, in their ordination vows, all officers of the PCA are required to receive and adopt the doctrinal standards and to approve of the form of government and discipline laid out in the documents of church order.

41 See Ramsay, *Exposition*, 167; and Smith, *Commentary*, 25-26, 279.

42 Church power is divided into dogmatic, diatactic and diacritic. “The first relating to doctrine, the second to polity and administration, the third to the judicial exercise of discipline.” The *Confession of Faith* and the *Catechisms* belong to the *potestas dogmatica*; the Form of Government and the Directory of Worship mainly to the *potestas diatactica*; the Rules of Discipline mainly to the *potestas diacritica*. Thomas Peck, *Notes on Ecclesiology* (Presbyterian Press, 2005), 120.

43 Paul R. Gilchrist, “PCA Church Polity” (lecture, Covenant Theological Seminary, St. Louis, MO, March 13 and 20, 1999).

44 *Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF)* 1.2.

45 *M1GA*, 1973, 1-31, 31.

46 *M27GA*, 1999, 27-44, III.12, 173.

The doctrinal standards adopted by the PCA are the *Westminster Confession of Faith* with the *Larger Catechism* and *Shorter Catechism*. These standards set forth the Church's mutually shared understanding of what Scripture teaches.

Written in the 1640s in England, the *Westminster Standards* were adopted (excepting certain clauses in the *Confession* relating to the civil magistrate) in 1729 by the Synod meeting in Philadelphia as the confession of their faith. At the formation of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America in 1788, the Church revised chapters 20.4, 23.3, and 31.2 of the *Confession*, removing the civil magistrate (i.e., the state) from involvement in ecclesiastical matters. It also removed the phrase "tolerating a false religion" from the list of sins forbidden in the answer to question 109 of the *Larger Catechism* and replaced "depopulations" in the answer to question 142 with "depredation."⁴⁷

At its founding in 1773, the PCA adopted the *Confession* with only the amendments made in 1788 and "the unamended Westminster Larger and Shorter Catechisms."⁴⁸ It made one additional amendment to the *Confession*: removing the identification of the Pope as the antichrist in 25.6.⁴⁹ Since their adoption at its founding, the PCA has made no changes to these Standards.

Within the Constitution, there is a hierarchy wherein the doctrinal standards take precedence over the documents of church order. *The Westminster Standards* come before the *BCO*, for the life of the Church is based upon the faith of the Church. This precedence is found in the vows that all officers take upon their ordination. The first three questions are:

1. Do you believe the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, as originally given, to be the inerrant Word of God, the only infallible rule of faith and practice?
2. Do you sincerely receive and adopt the *Confession of Faith* and the *Catechisms* of this Church, as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures; and do you further promise that if at any time you find yourself out of accord with any of the fundamentals of this system of doctrine, you will on your own initiative, make known to your Presbytery the change which has taken place in your views since the assumption of this ordination vow?
3. Do you approve of the form of government and discipline of the Presbyterian Church in America, in conformity with the general principles of Biblical polity?⁵⁰

⁴⁷ *The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms as Adopted by the Presbyterian Church in America with Proof Texts* (Christian Education & Publications Committee of the Presbyterian Church in America, 2007), vii-viii.

⁴⁸ *MIGA*, 1973, 1-31, 31.

⁴⁹ Sean Michael Lucas, *For a Continuing Church: The Roots of the Presbyterian Church in America* (P&R Publishing, 2015), 306-307. Also, Paul Settle, *To God All Praise and Glory: Under God: Celebrating the Past, Claiming the Future, the Presbyterian Church in America* (Presbyterian Church in America, 1998), 48. And Smartt, *I Am Reminded*, 95. According to these sources, the 1788 amendments to the *WLC* were also adopted, but the minutes of the First General Assembly do not reflect this (*MIGA*, 1973, 1-31, 31 and Appendix A, 106 and 111). The editions of the *WLC* published by the PCA since have a mixed record of whether those changes are included.

⁵⁰ *BCO* 21-5 and 24-6.

In these questions, the ordinand declares his faith.⁵¹ He declares his belief that the Bible is the only infallible rule of faith and practice with the first vow. In the second, he receives the doctrinal standards of the Church and adopts them as his own utterance of his beliefs. In the third, the ordinand approves of the form of government and discipline. In these vows, the Scriptures are said to be the Word of God; the doctrinal standards are adopted as containing the system of doctrine taught in Scripture, but the form of government and discipline is merely approved as being in conformity with the general principles of biblical polity.⁵²

Cannada and Williamson argue that this distinction in language is vital.⁵³ Though every officer of the PCA is committed to the entire Constitution, both the doctrinal standards and the *BCO*, the ordination vows commit the ordinand to the doctrinal standards found in the *Confession* and *Catechisms*, whereas the commitment is to the “form” of government set forth in the *BCO*. They argue that the Constitution applies only to the form of government, and therefore “we are free to consider the procedural details of the *BCO* dealing with government as advisory, helpful and to be seriously considered and respected but that strict adherence to them is not obligatory.” They liken it to the language used by the Synod of 1729 (that adopted the *Confession* and *Catechisms* as the doctrinal standard for the Presbyterian Church in the colonies) with reference to the Directory for Worship, Discipline, and Government written by the Westminster divines. The Synod declared that they should be “observed as near as circumstances will allow and Christian prudence direct.” Given Cannada’s and Williamson’s roles in the foundation of the PCA, their position is an influential view, but it has not been the functional practice of the denomination.

Subscription to the *Westminster Standards*, adopting them as the expression of one’s own faith, thus bounds the practice of the *BCO*, framing how that faith is lived out in the corporate life of God’s people. The principles of doctrine that underlie the government and discipline of the church are laid out in the *Westminster Standards* and are adopted as the officer’s own statements of what Scripture reveals. The application of these principles as delineated in the *BCO* is then approved as being in general conformity with the principles of doctrine as expressed in the *Westminster Standards*. The life of the church, including its form of government and discipline, is to conform to the doctrinal positions derived from Scripture. The doctrine of the church is the basis on which its government rests. Receiving and adopting the doctrinal standards while simply approving the form of government and discipline necessitates that the *BCO* be subject to and subordinate to the *Westminster Standards*.

This gradation is reflected in the process of amending the Constitution. Amendment follows a threefold process: approval by the General Assembly, the advice and consent of

51 Smith, *Commentary*, 225.

52 Ramsay, *Exposition*, 135.

53 Robert C. Cannada and W. Jack Williamson, *The Historic Polity of the PCA* (Jackson, MS: First Presbyterian Church, 1997), 41–42.

the Presbyteries, and then final approval by a subsequent General Assembly. To amend the *BCO* requires the approval by a majority of each General Assembly and two-thirds of the Presbyteries. For the doctrinal standards, the bar is three-fourths approval at each step.⁵⁴ The Constitution thus recognizes the higher commitment required to the *Westminster Standards* and sets a higher bar for amending the doctrinal standards than for amending the form of government and discipline.

⁵⁴ *BCO* 26-2 (*BCO*) and 26-3 (*Westminster Standards*). It is important to note that amending 26-3 delineating the requirements to amend the doctrinal standards may only be amended by the same method prescribed for the doctrinal standards themselves. The standards for amending the *BCO* follow the same standards as every other *BCO* provision.