

## **POLITY OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (U.S.A.) WHY WE ARE THE WAY WE ARE**

John Calvin, when asked what would happen if each member of the church did as they pleased, answered: "the ultimate dissolution of the church." When joining the church, each member voluntarily submits to the church's discipline.

All societies have rules. There would be anarchy without them. Rules or laws are based on principles (that which is meaningful or expedient) and tradition (that which has worked in the past). The initial rules for the Judeo-Christian societies are the Ten Commandments.

There are three forms of church rules or governments. The "Episcopal" forms are hierarchical with bishops presiding. The Roman Catholic Church, the Episcopal Church, and the Methodist Churches are examples of this form of government. The "Congregational" form is democratic and independent. A church with this form of government is often loosely connected with other churches of the same denomination. The United Church of Christ, the Baptist Churches, and the Assemblies of God are a few examples. The "Presbyterian" form of government is representative and consultative. The United States government was inspired by the Presbyterian form of government. All of the above forms of government are scripturally based. The word *presbyteros* (which means "elder") occurs 72 times in the New Testament.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is guided by a Constitution with two parts:

- I. *The Book of Confessions*
- II. *The Book of Order*

The Apostle Paul wrote,

*Anyone who claims to be a prophet, or to have spiritual powers, must acknowledge that what I am writing to you is a command of the Lord. Anyone who does not recognize this is not to be recognized. So my friends, be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues; but all things should be done decently and in order. (1Cor.14:37-40)*

"Decently and in order" are bywords of our denominations. We are guided by principles which are foundational and based on Scripture. The first four chapters of the *Book of Order* formulate our understanding of these principles.

The principles in these chapters are also the foundation for the total life our church. They provide a common language and assist members in understanding what it means to be a Presbyterian. The *Book of Confessions* helps us to understand these principles in their historical context, and the *Book of Order* assists us in living out these principles. The *Book of Order* is not just a book of arbitrary laws but a book of rules to enable us to carry out the Great Ends of the Church:

- the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind
- the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God
- the maintenance of divine worship
- the preservation of the truth
- the promotion of social righteousness
- the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world (G-1.0200)