

## On Being Presbyterian

Exodus 18:13-24; 1 Peter 5:1-5

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First  
Presbyterian Church of Portland, Indiana on February 1, 2015]

### I

Today's opening hymn, "The Church's One Foundation," is one of my favorites,  
and I hope it's one of yours too.

So let me begin by telling you how this great hymn of the Church came to be.

It was written by the Rev. Samuel Stone in 1866 during a time of theological controversy within  
the Anglican Church.

An Anglican bishop in South Africa, John William Colenso, had published a book questioning  
whether Moses wrote the Pentateuch, Joshua even existed, and the accuracy of Jesus' statements  
about Moses.

In the midst of the controversy, Samuel Stone wrote 12 hymns based on the Apostles Creed.

He was concerned that people were reciting the Creed in a perfunctory manner, without really  
understanding what the words meant.

"The Church's One Foundation" was meant to expound the ninth article—  
"I believe...in the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints."

Samuel Stone alludes to the controversy in the Anglican Church in stanza 3, which is left out of  
some hymnals, but is included in both our hymnal and *Glory to God*, the new Presbyterian  
hymnal.

Hear the words of that stanza again:

*Though with a scornful wonder this world sees her oppressed,  
By schisms rent asunder, by heresies distressed,  
Yet saints their watch are keeping; Their cry goes up: "How Long?"  
And soon the night of weeping shall be the morn of song.*

## II

Although those words were written nearly 150 years ago, it is hard to think of a more accurate description of the Presbyterian Church, USA in 2015.

For when the world looks at the Presbyterian Church, it sees a church “oppressed,”  
 a church in decline—from a peak of 4.25 million members in 1965,  
 by the time the 2014 statistics are released later this year, our membership will  
 likely have dropped below 1.7 million.

The world looks upon a church “with scornful wonder”—  
 a once influential church—so much so that in 1953 President Dwight Eisenhower was  
 baptized into the Presbyterian Church, and it was said that on any given Sunday he could  
 have called a cabinet meeting at the National City Presbyterian Church in Washington—  
 now the PC, USA is, if not scorned, at least ignored in the national media.

The world sees a church split into numerous factions,  
 as Stone put it, “by schisms rent asunder.”

Presbyterians Pro Life...Presbyterians Affirming Reproductive Options...  
 the Presbyterian Lay Committee...the Covenant Network of Presbyterians...  
 Presbyterians for Renewal...More Light Presbyterians...  
 Presbyterians for Middle East Peace...  
 Israel/Palestine Mission Network of PC, USA.

So many are the groups and factions, that even life-long Presbyterians have trouble keeping them  
 all straight.

The world sees a church in deep conflict over theological and social issues—  
 “By heresies distressed,” says Samuel Stone—  
 with several hundred churches departing the denomination over the last few years because of  
 these conflicts over theological and social issues.

And yet...having experienced life and ministry in another denomination—  
 American Baptists Churches, USA—  
 with its own conflicts and struggles,  
 I can tell you that I am enthusiastic about being Presbyterian.

I am impressed with the rich theological heritage of the Reformed tradition and by the many  
 creative ministries that are being carried out at all levels of the PC, USA.

I appreciate the guidelines in the Book of Order and the emphasis on doing things “decently and in order” (more about that next Sunday).

I am grateful that I have found a home among God’s “frozen chosen” at the three churches I’ve served—

Seven Mile, Bellbrook, and now FPCP—  
and the two presbyteries I’ve been a member of,  
Miami Valley and Whitewater Valley.

Speaking from the vantage point of a “Baptiterian,” I would like to tell you my reasons for optimism for our church, our presbytery, and our denomination.

### III

First, the polity of churches in the Presbyterian-Reformed tradition is based on...**sin**.

The Reformed tradition has always recognized the truth of what St. Paul writes in Romans 3:23—*“All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”*

Presbyterians take sin so seriously that they designed a polity that is intended to take the reality of both individual and corporate sin into account.

There are three basic forms of church polity, or government.

There is the Episcopal form of government, in which authority resides in the bishop.

Examples include the Roman Catholic Church,  
the Episcopal Church,  
and the United Methodist Church.

Since the bishop is the one in authority, there is always the danger of that individual taking on the role of a monarch—

acting in an arbitrary or even arrogant fashion.

One particularly painful example is how some Roman Catholic bishops have dealt with the sex abuse scandal by moving offending priests from parish to parish and urging victims and their parents to keep silent and not rock the boat.

On the other end of the spectrum is the congregational form of government,  
where authority resides in the members of a local church.

Examples include Baptists, Congregationalists (e.g. the United Church of Christ), and the various Christian Churches—

Disciples of Christ,  
Church of Christ,  
and Independent Christian Churches.

The danger is that the autonomy of local churches can lead to the abuse of that autonomy on the part of both pastors and congregations.

When a church can do whatever it pleases...

when denominational staff have no real authority to step in and put a stop to destructive behavior or make necessary changes,  
the result is damage to the ministry and mission of the church.

This reality was illustrated by the comment of a colleague from my Indianapolis days who said:  
“Baptist churches are so independent not even the Lord can get in.”

#### IV

Presbyterians fall in the middle of the spectrum, where authority rests in ruling elders elected **by the congregation** to represent the congregation **before God**.

Each local church is governed by ruling elders like the one we are installing today.

The ruling elders and the teaching elder, the pastor, sit together in *session* and are responsible for the total life and ministry of the congregation,  
including overseeing the work of the deacons and committees of the church.

This awesome responsibility is spelled out in our lesson from 1 Peter 5:

*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 Peter 5:1-3)*

Our form of government falls between the other two.

We have not just one person in charge nor all the members in charge,  
but a representative group from the congregation  
chosen and ordained to be in charge.

The earliest model of this is found in our Old Testament lesson, Exodus 18, where Moses' father-in-law Jethro advises him to appoint men to serve as elders (they are not called elders, but that is their function), whose job was to help adjudicate disputes among the people and to assist Moses in representing the people before God.

Why did Presbyterians choose this form of government? Because of sin.

At the time of the Reformation, power in both temporal and spiritual matters was vested in kings, bishops, cardinals, and, of course, the pope.

Power was exercised from the top down, and corruption at many levels was one of the things that gave rise to the Reformation.

The early reformers—in particular, John Calvin and John Knox—were aware of the tendency of sin to infect any human organization and hierarchy.

So Calvin and Knox, believing that God's Spirit could move us collectively in ways that would never be possible individually,

designed a representative form of government that allowed for power to be dispersed among a group of ordained elders in order to minimize the effects of sin in the church.

They knew the danger of collective sin, and felt that elders acting on behalf of the congregation were less likely to be arrogant and arbitrary in the wielding of power.

So the Presbyterian Church designed a system of government that is like the United States government in that there are a series of checks and balances.

If the Session of a church is operating in violation of the Book of Order, the presbytery can step in, dissolve the Session, and assume responsibility for the congregation to help it overcome the difficulties it is facing.

## V

Second, it is important to note that the pastor can do very little on his or her own.

Some Sessions have been known to allow the pastor to become a tyrant or dictator, but they are negligent (and so is the presbytery) to allow that to happen.

The pastor alone can baptize no one.

He or she cannot make decisions about the use of church property;  
 decide who will become a member or cease to be a member;  
 hire or fire a staff member;  
 schedule a wedding;  
 or decide who will be elders and deacons.

The Session is responsible for all these things.

The pastor is the moderator of the Session with voice and vote and the authority to set the agenda.

The pastor can exercise important leadership within the congregation,  
 but the pastor can do or decide very little without the action of the Session.

About the only things the pastor can do without Session approval are...  
 choose the scripture readings and hymns for worship,  
 and decide who to marry, bury, and what to preach!

We Presbyterians do not have a pure democracy,  
 but a representative form of government similar to that of the United States.

This is not a coincidence!

Every governing body above the Session is to have parity—  
 an equal number of ruling elders and teaching elders.

The Reformers rejected rule by priests and paid professionals in favor of all church members being “represented” by those whom they elect and ordain to be elders and ministers on behalf of the congregation.

## VI

The most important implication of our form of government is that ruling elders and ministers do not necessarily serve the will of the people, but the will of Christ.

James Angell, in his book *How to Spell Presbyterian*, writes,

*“Elders need to be sensitive to congregational feelings, but their first responsibility is to Jesus Christ and their own consciences. This is fundamental within our system. Elders are not called to manage Christ’s affairs by applause meters or nose counts.”*

This fundamental principal is not always understood very well.

In November we had a national election when a number of new members of the US Congress were elected to the House and to the Senate.

No doubt those new office-holders went to Washington with the idea that their job is to survey the views of their constituents and vote accordingly.

That may be how our national government works,  
but that is not how the Presbyterian Church is to work.

Persons elected for leadership are to seek the will of God in concert with other elders and ministers in Session,  
and with all presbyters in a meeting of a higher governing body,  
such as the General Assembly.

Again, we see this made explicit in 1 Peter 5—

*“...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 as the choir would have you do it...  
the women’s fellowship...  
the adult Sunday school class...  
or any other group in the church would have you do it,  
**but as God would have you do it.**

As ministers and elders, we are to represent God,  
seek the mind of Christ,  
and make decisions on behalf of the congregation  
under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Yes...it can be risky to seek the mind of Christ.

God might want us to abolish child labor,  
change our views on slavery,  
affirm that God calls women and men equally to the offices of the church,  
or welcome homosexuals into church membership and leadership.

Many Presbyterians don't understand this, and it is not uncommon to hear someone complain of an action by a Presbyterian governing body—

for example, in the 1970s, controversies over Angela Davis, the Vietnam War, abortion, or women's liberation—

and the person will say, "they don't speak for me."

They are right! Sessions and presbyteries and General Assemblies do not speak for you—**they speak to you on behalf of God!**

I recall being in a meeting with the Rev. Dr. Thomas Stewart, long-time pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church in Buffalo, New York. He remarked to us that he started his ministry at Westminster the same week the news broke of a Presbyterian Church grant to the Angela Davis defense fund. I remember his comment: *It was an interesting time to be the new pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church!*

Remember again what Jethro says to Moses:

*"You should represent the people before God and you should bring their cases before God; teach them the statutes and instructions and make known to them the way they are to go and the things they are to do."* (Ex. 18:19-20)

Peter: *"Tend the flock of God...as God would have you do it."*

## VII

I know of a church where decisions by the Session caused a huge uproar.

The pastor and Session felt God leading them to start a Saturday evening contemporary worship service to reach new families in their growing community.

They spent nearly a year planning for the start of the services. They bought audio/visual equipment and installed it in the sanctuary. They hired a musician from a neighboring church to plan and lead the music.

When the Session voted to remove eight pews from the front of the sanctuary—four from each side—and purchase pew chairs so the Saturday service could have flexible seating, the you-know-what hit the fan.

Many of the members of that church lived at the retirement village where I was chaplain; I knew many of them and had preached there a number of times. One of the life-long members complained to me about the removal of the pews.

I said to her, “Edith, no one even sits in those pews.” She walked out in a huff.

The Saturday evening services started, but the controversy did not go away. The efforts of the pastor and Session were undermined. My friend ended up resigning and moved to a church in another state. Most of the Session resigned and left the church, as did many of the young families.

Today that congregation is less than half the size it was before the controversy erupted.

It was a case of the tail wagging the dog and not understanding that decisions in a Presbyterian church must never be based on popular opinion alone.

## VIII

The final thing that makes me optimistic about the Presbyterian Church is a saying that the Reformers had (you may recall this from last October’s Reformation Day sermon)—

*"Ecclesia semper reformanda, semper reformanda"—*

**“The church reformed and always reforming.”**

We believe the church never reaches a "reformed" state. We are always in the process of being reformed. Only as we open ourselves to the power of the Holy Spirit can growth and change take place.

Some churches hand down doctrine and simply expect their members to accept it without question. Being Presbyterian means an emphasis on personal freedom and responsibility.

With Jesus Christ as the church’s one foundation, every Presbyterian must find his/her own personal path to a genuine faith through worship, study, service, and prayer.

None of us has arrived; all of us are in the process of being reformed.

We are part of a great Church and our polity binds us together in a community of believers who trust one another and trust the leading of God’s Spirit.

You who are ruling elders and deacons of First Presbyterian Church Portland are called to seek God’s will and act on behalf of God’s people in this place.

You will find strength in our form of government  
and wisdom in our Reformed theology.

Ours is not a perfect form of government, but in my opinion, it is better than the alternatives.

So let us seek reformation and renewal of ourselves,  
our congregation,  
and the PC, USA.

Let us continue the journey and be encouraged by the words of Samuel Stone:

*And soon the night of weeping shall be the morn of song.*

Amen.

Sources:

James Angell, "How to Spell Presbyterian," Geneva Press, 2002, 42-43.

"The Church's One Foundation," retrieved from <http://songsandhymns.org/hymns/detail/the-churchs-one-foundation>

George H. McConnel, "On Being Presbyterian," sermon preached May 23, 2010, Dayton, Ohio