

Presbyterianism 101: A General Guide to Facts About The Presbyterian Church (USA)

Historical Roots

Presbyterians trace their history to the 16th century and the Protestant Reformation. Our heritage, and much of what we believe, began with the French lawyer John Calvin (1509- 1564), whose writings crystallized much of the Reformed thinking that came before him. John Calvin, further refined the reformers' new way of thinking about the nature of God and God's relationship with humanity in what came to be known as Reformed theology. Calvin did much of his writing from Geneva, Switzerland. From there, the Reformed movement spread to other parts of Europe and the British Isles. John Knox, a Scotsman who studied with Calvin in Geneva, Switzerland, took Calvin's teachings back to Scotland. Many of the early Presbyterians in America came from England, Scotland and Ireland. The Rev. Francis Makemie, who arrived in the U.S. from Ireland in 1683, helped to organize the first American Presbytery at Philadelphia in 1706. In 1725, the Rev. William Tennent founded a ministerial 'log college' in Pennsylvania. Twenty years later, the College of New Jersey (now known as Princeton University) was established. The Rev. John Witherspoon, was a Presbyterian minister and the President of Princeton University from 1768-1793. The first General Assembly was held in the same city in 1789. The first Assembly was convened by the Rev. John Witherspoon, the only minister to sign the Declaration of Independence.

- **Presbyterian Distinctives:** Presbyterians are distinctive in two major ways: they adhere to a pattern of religious thought known as Reformed theology and a form of government that stresses the active, representational leadership of both ministers and church members. **Presbyterianism refers less to a religion as it does to a form of church governance.** The Greek word Presbyter refers to an elder. Presbyterians are governed by elders.

Reformed Theology

Theology is a way of thinking about God and God's relation to the world. Reformed theology evolved during the 16th century religious movement known as the Protestant Reformation. It emphasizes God's supremacy over everything and humanity's chief purpose as being to glorify and enjoy God forever. In its confessions, the Presbyterian Church (USA) expresses the faith of the Reformed tradition. Central to this tradition is the affirmation of the majesty, holiness, and providence of God who creates, sustains, rules and redeems the world in the freedom of sovereign righteousness and love. Related to this central affirmation of God's sovereignty are other great themes of the Reformed tradition:

1. The election of the people of God for service as well as for salvation.
2. Covenant life marked by a disciplined concern for order in the church according to the Word of God
3. A faithful stewardship that shuns ostentation and seeks proper use of the gifts of God's creation
4. The recognition of the human tendency to idolatry and tyranny, which calls the people of God to work for the transformation of society by seeking justice and living in obedience to the Word of God

Church Governance A major contributor to the Reformed theology was John Calvin, who converted from Roman Catholicism after training for the priesthood and in the law. In exile in Geneva, Switzerland, Calvin developed the Presbyterian pattern of church government, which vests governing authority primarily in elected laypersons known as elders. The word Presbyterian comes from the Greek word for elder. Elders are chosen by the people. Together with ministers of the Word and Sacrament, they exercise leadership, government and discipline and have responsibilities for the life of a particular church as well as the church at large, including ecumenical relationships. Elders compose the local governing body for a congregation known as the Session. When elected commissioners to higher governing bodies, elders participate and vote with the same authority as ministers of the Word and Sacrament, and they are eligible for any office. They are elected by the congregation and in one sense are representatives of the other members of the congregation. On the other hand, their primary charge is to seek to discover and represent the will of Christ as they govern. Presbyterian elders are both elected and ordained. Through ordination they are officially set apart for service. They retain their ordination beyond their term in office. The other governing bodies are presbyteries, which are composed of several churches; synods, which are composed of several presbyteries; and the General Assembly, which represents the entire denomination. Elders and ministers who serve on these governing bodies are also called presbyters.

Points of Distinction

Women in the Church

One of the places where the church has had the opportunity to live up to its proclamations for the equality of all persons is in the status that it gives women in its own life and work. Although women were first ordained as elders in one of the predecessor denominations to the Presbyterian Church (USA) in 1930, it was not until 1956 that presbyteries were permitted to ordain women to the ministry. In a different predecessor denomination, the 1956 General Assembly approved changes in the church's constitution to allow the election of women as deacons and ruling elders. As ministers, women were ordained beginning 1965.

Predestination

Predestination is a teaching to which some Christians have adhered, including the Reformed theologian John Calvin. While the doctrine of predestination has sometimes been hotly disputed, it belongs within the larger context of John Calvin's teachings about God's grace. Calvin argued from Scripture that God has "predestined" or "elected" some people to be saved in Jesus Christ and others not to be. For Calvin, the point of the doctrine of predestination was to remind us that God is free and gracious. There is nothing that we can do to earn God's favor. Rather, our salvation comes from God alone. We are able to choose God because God first chose us. Properly understood, the doctrine of predestination frees us from speculating about who is saved and who is not. God has already taken care of these matters in the mystery of God's own being.

Sacraments

Denominations often differ over what they recognize as sacraments. Some recognize as many as seven sacraments, others have no sacraments in the life of the church. The Presbyterian Church (USA) has two sacraments, Baptism and the Lord's Supper. "The Reformed tradition understands

Baptism and the Lord's Supper to be Sacraments, instituted by God and commended by Christ. Sacraments are signs of the real presence and power of Christ in the Church, symbols of God's action. Through the Sacraments, God seals believers in redemption, renews their identity as the people of God, and marks them for service." "The early Church, following Jesus, took three primary material elements of life—water, bread, and wine—to become basic symbols of offering life to God as Jesus had offered his life. Being washed with the water of Baptism, Christians received new life in Christ and presented their bodies to be living sacrifices to God. Eating bread and drinking wine they received the sustaining presence of Christ, remembered God's covenant promise, and pledged their obedience anew."

[Baptism](#) – [please also see our Baptismal Guide](#)

The Bible declares that God claimed humanity as God's own "before the foundation of the world." (Ephesians 1:4) Both believers and their children are included in God's covenant love. The baptism of children witnesses to the truth that God's love claims people before they are able to respond in faith. Baptism, therefore, often occurs during infancy, though a person may be baptized at any age. The water that is used symbolizes three accounts from the Bible's Old Testament: the waters of creation, the flood described in the story of Noah, and the Hebrews' escape from slavery in Egypt by crossing the Red Sea. All three stories link humanity to God's goodness through water. Baptism signifies: ^ The faithfulness of God, ^ The washing away of sin, ^ Rebirth, ^ Putting on the fresh garment of Christ, ^ Being sealed by God's Spirit, ^ Adoption into the covenant family of the Church, ^ Resurrection and illumination in Christ. Unlike some denominations, Presbyterians do not require a person to be entirely immersed in water during baptism. Baptism is received only once. Its effect is not tied to the moment when it is administered, for it signifies the beginning of life in Christ, not its completion. The Presbyterian Church (USA) believes that persons of other denominations are part of one body of Christian believers; therefore, it recognizes and accepts baptisms by other Christian churches. Baptism is almost always administered as part of a worship service. In the Presbyterian Church (USA), baptism must be authorized by the session of a particular congregation and performed by a minister.

[Lord's Supper](#) – [The Sacrament of Holy Communion](#)

"The Lord's Supper is the sign and seal of eating and drinking in communion with the crucified and risen Lord. During his earthly ministry Jesus shared meals with his followers as a sign of community and acceptance and as an occasion for his own ministry." Around the Table of the Lord, God's people are in communion with Christ and with all who belong to Christ. Reconciliation with Christ compels reconciliation with one another.

Open Communion

All the baptized faithful are to be welcomed to the Table, and none shall be excluded because of race, sex, age, economic status, social class, handicapping condition, difference of culture or language, or any barrier created by human injustice. Coming to the Lord's Table the faithful are actively to seek reconciliation in every instance of conflict or division between them and their

neighbors. The Lord's Supper is to be observed on the Lord's Day, in the regular place of worship, and in a manner suitable to the particular occasion and local congregation. It is appropriate to celebrate the Lord's Supper as often as each Lord's Day. It is to be celebrated regularly and frequently enough to be recognized as integral to the Service for the Lord's Day. The invitation to the Lord's Supper is extended to all who have been baptized, remembering that access to the Table is not a right conferred upon the worthy, but a privilege given to the undeserving who come in faith, repentance, and love. In preparing to receive Christ in this Sacrament, the believer is to confess sin and brokenness, to seek reconciliation with God and neighbor, and to trust in Jesus Christ for cleansing and renewal. Even one who doubts or whose trust is wavering may come to the Table in order to be assured of God's love and grace in Christ Jesus."

[What's Presbyterian Worship like?](#)

The order of a Sunday Worship service in a Presbyterian church is determined by the pastor and the session. It generally includes prayer, music, Bible reading and a sermon based upon scripture. The Sacraments, a time of personal response/offering, and a sharing of community concerns are also parts of worship. The constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA) suggests that worship be ordered in terms of three major actions centered in the word of God (gathering around the word, proclaiming the word, responding to the word, that is: bearing and following the word into the world).

[• Prayer](#)

"Prayer is at the heart of worship. In prayer, through the Holy Spirit, people seek after and are found by the one true God who has been revealed in Jesus Christ. They listen and wait upon God, call God by name, remember God's gracious acts, and offer themselves to God. Prayer may be spoken, sung, offered in silence, or enacted. Prayer grows out of the center of a person's life in response to the Spirit. Prayer is shaped by the Word of God in Scripture and by the life of the community of faith. Prayer issues in commitment to join God's work in the world."

[• Music](#)

"Song is a response which engages the whole self in prayer. Song unites the faithful in common prayer wherever they gather for worship whether in church, home, or other special place...through the ages and from varied cultures, the church has developed additional musical forms for congregational prayer. Congregations are encouraged to use these diverse musical forms for prayer as well as those which arise out of the musical life of their own cultures. To lead the congregation in the singing of prayer is a primary role of the choir and other musicians. They also may pray on behalf of the congregation with introits, responses and other musical forms. Instrumental music may be a form of prayer since words are not essential to prayer. In worship, music is not to be for entertainment or artistic display. Care should be taken that it not be used merely as a cover for silence.

[• Scripture](#)

"The church confesses the Scriptures to be the Word of God written, witnessing to God's self-revelation. Where that Word is read and proclaimed, Jesus Christ the Living Word is present by the inward witness of the Holy Spirit. For this reason the reading, hearing, preaching and confessing of the Word are central to Christian worship. The session shall ensure that in public worship the Scripture is read and proclaimed regularly in the common language(s) of the

particular church." "The minister of Word and Sacrament is responsible for the selection of Scripture to be read in all services of public worship and should exercise care so that over a period of time the people will hear the full message of Scripture.

- **Preaching**

"The preached Word or sermon is to be based upon the written Word. It is a proclamation of Scripture in the conviction that through the Holy Spirit Jesus Christ is present to the gathered people, offering grace and calling for obedience...the sermon should present the gospel with simplicity and clarity, in language which can be understood by the people...the preaching of the Word shall ordinarily be done by a minister of Word and Sacrament. "The Word is also proclaimed through song in anthems and solos based on scriptural texts, in cantatas and oratorios which tell the biblical story, in psalms and canticles, and in hymns, spirituals and spiritual songs which present the truth of the biblical faith. Song in worship may also express the response of the people to the Word read, sung, enacted, or proclaimed. Drama and dance, poetry and pageant, indeed, most other human art forms are also expressions through which the people of God have proclaimed and responded to the Word."

- **Offering**

"The Christian life is an offering of one's self and substance to God. In worship the people are presented with the costly self-offering of Jesus Christ, are claimed and set free by him, and are led to respond by offering to him their lives, their particular gifts and abilities, and their material goods. It is a spiritual discipline and an expression of gratitude. There are many ways to give to the ministry of the church and each individual is encouraged to find their own way.