

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



The seal of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is a symbolic statement of the church's heritage, identity, and mission in contemporary form. Its power depends on both its simplicity and complexity, as well as its traditional and enduring qualities. The basic symbols in the seal are the cross, Scripture, the dove, and flames. The dominant structural and theological element in the design is the cross -- the universal and most ecumenical symbol of the Christian church. The cross represents the incarnate love of God in Jesus Christ, and his passion and resurrection. Because of its association with Presbyterian history, the Celtic cross was chosen as a model for this contemporary rendering of the ancient symbol.

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.

Calvin did much of his writing from Geneva, Switzerland. From there, the Reformed movement spread to other parts of Europe and the British Isles. Many of the early Presbyterians in America came from England, Scotland and Ireland. The first American Presbytery was organized at Philadelphia in 1706. 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 Church History

Portions of the Presbyterian Church in the United States have separated from the main body, and some parts have reunited, several times. The greatest division occurred in 1861 during the American Civil War. The two branches created by that division were reunited in 1983 to form the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), currently the largest Presbyterian group in this country.

The earliest Christian church consisted of Jews in the first century who had known Jesus and heard his teachings. It gradually grew and spread from the Middle East to other parts of the world, though not without controversy and hardship among its supporters.

During the 4th Century, after more than 300 years of persecution under various Roman emperors, the church became established as a political as well as a spiritual power under the Emperor Constantine. Theological and political disagreements, however, served to widen the rift between members of the eastern (Greek-speaking) and western (Latin-speaking) branches of the church. Eventually the western portions of Europe, came under the religious and political authority of the Roman Catholic Church. Eastern Europe and parts of Asia came under the authority of the Eastern Orthodox Church.

In Western Europe, the authority of the Roman Catholic Church remained largely unquestioned until the Renaissance in the 15th century. The invention of the printing press in Germany around 1440 made it possible for common people to have access to printed materials including the Bible. This, in turn, enabled many to discover religious thinkers who had begun to question the authority of the Roman Catholic Church. One such figure, Martin Luther, a German priest and professor, started the movement known as the Protestant Reformation when he posted a list of 95 grievances against the Roman Catholic Church on a church door in Wittenberg, Germany in 1517. Some 20 years later, a French/Swiss theologian, 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. John Knox, a Scotsman who studied with Calvin in Geneva, Switzerland, took Calvin's teachings back to Scotland. Other Reformed communities developed in England, Holland and France. The Presbyterian Church traces its ancestry back primarily to Scotland and England.

Presbyterians have featured prominently in United States history. 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. Other Presbyterian ministers, such as the Rev. Jonathan Edwards and the Rev. Gilbert Tennent, were driving forces in the so-called "Great Awakening", a revivalist movement in the early 18th century. One of the signers of the Declaration of Independence, the Rev. John Witherspoon, was a Presbyterian minister and the President of Princeton University from 1768-1793.

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.

▪ 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:

- The election of the people of God for service as well as for salvation
- Covenant life marked by a disciplined concern for order in the church according to the Word of God
- A faithful stewardship that shuns ostentation and seeks proper use of the gifts of God's creation
- 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 Government

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. They shall serve faithfully as members of 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.

The body of elders elected to govern a particular congregation is called a session. 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. Ministers who serve the congregation are also part of the session. The session is the smallest, most local governing body. 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. Those changes were defeated by the presbyteries, but the 1957 General Assembly responded to the defeat by urging that women be included in all church committees including those on finances and budget. The first ordination of women as elders in this denomination actually occurred in 1962. As ministers, women were ordained beginning 1965.

In 1971, the General Assembly sent overtures to its presbyteries providing for election to church offices "in all governing bodies, "giving attention to a fair representation of both the male and female constituency."

➤ 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. He insisted, nonetheless, that we could be sure only of our own salvation; we were never in a position to judge whether or not another person was saved. As the Second Helvetic Confession says,

"We must hope well of all, and not rashly judge any man to be a reprobate."

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. We are called to hear God's good news in Jesus Christ and to trust in God through Jesus Christ.

"For the preaching of the Gospel is to be heard, and it is to be believed; and it is to be held as beyond doubt that if you believe and are in Christ, you are elected." (Second Helvetic Confession)

"The doctrine of predestination is to be "held in harmony with the doctrine of [God's] love to all mankind...[and] with the doctrine that God desires not the death of any sinner, but has provided in Christ a salvation sufficient for all" (amendment to the Westminster Confession of Faith)

➤ Infant Baptism

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. Children of believers are to be baptized without undue delay, but without undue haste. Baptism, whether administered to those who profess their faith or to those presented for Baptism as children, is one and the same Sacrament. The baptism of children witnesses to the truth that God's love claims people before they are able to respond in faith.

Baptism, therefore, usually occurs during infancy, though a person may be baptized at any age. Parents bring their baby to church, where they publicly declare their desire that he or she be baptized. When an infant or child is baptized the church commits itself to

nurture the child in faith. When adults are baptized they make a public profession of faith.

Baptism distinguishes children of those who believe in God's redemptive power from children of nonbelievers. 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.

➤ 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

"In Baptism, the Holy Spirit binds the Church in covenant to its Creator and Lord. The water of Baptism symbolizes the waters of creation, of the blood, and of the Exodus from Egypt. Thus, the water of Baptism links us to the goodness of God's creation and to the grace of God's covenants with Noah and Israel. Prophets of Israel, amidst the failure of their own generation to honor God's covenant, called for justice to roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream. (Amos 5:24) They envisioned a fresh expression of God's grace and of creation's goodness—a new covenant accompanied by the sprinkling of cleansing water. In his ministry, Jesus offered the gift of living water. So, Baptism is the sign and seal of God's grace and covenant in Christ. "Baptism enacts and seals what the Word proclaims: God's redeeming grace offered to all people. Baptism is God's gift of grace and also God's summons to respond to that grace. Baptism calls to repentance, to faithfulness, and to discipleship. Baptism gives the church its identity and commissions the church for ministry to the world." "The water used for baptism should be common to the location, and shall be applied to the person by pouring, sprinkling, or immersion. By whatever mode, the water should be applied visibly and generously." "Baptism is received only once. There are many times in worship, however, when believers acknowledge the grace of God continually at work. As they participate in the celebration of another's Baptism, as they experience the sustaining nurture of the Lord's Supper, and as they reaffirm the commitments made at Baptism, they confess their ongoing need of God's grace and pledge anew their obedience to God's covenant in Christ." "As there is one body, there is one Baptism. (Eph. 4:4-6). The Presbyterian Church (USA) recognizes all Baptisms with water in the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit administered by other Christian churches."

Lord's Supper

"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. 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 five major actions centered in the word of God (gathering around the word, proclaiming the word, responding to the word, the sealing of the word, and bearing and following the word into the world), but recognizes that "other orders of worship may also serve the needs of a particular church and be orderly, faithful to Scripture, and true to historic principles."

- [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. It is appropriate that in the Service for the Lord’s Day there be readings from the Old Testament and the Epistles and Gospels of the New Testament. The full range of the psalms should be also used in worship. Selections for reading in public worship should be guided by the seasons of the church year, pastoral concerns for a local congregation, events and conditions in the world, and specific program emphases of the church. Lectionaries offered by the church ensure a broad range of readings as well as consistency and connection with the universal Church”

- 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.”

- Sacraments

“The Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper are God’s acts of sealing the promises of faith within the community of faith as the congregation worships, and include the responses of the faithful to the Word proclaimed and enacted in the sacraments.”

- Offering

“The Christian life is an offering of one’s self 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. Worship should always offer opportunities to respond to Christ's call to become disciples by professing faith, by uniting with the church, and by taking up the mission of the people of God, as well as opportunities for disciples to renew the world."

- **Community Concerns**

"Worship is an activity of the common life of the people of God in which the care of the members for each other and for the quality of their life and ministry together expresses the reality of God's power to create and sustain community in the midst of a sinful world. As God is concerned for the events in daily life, so members of the community in worship appropriately express concern for one another and for their ministry in the world."

THEOLOGY

- **The Brief Statement of Faith**

Preface

In 1983 the two largest Presbyterian churches in the United States reunited, the "Plan for Reunion" called for the preparation of a brief statement of the Reformed faith for possible inclusion in the Book of Confessions. This statement is therefore not intended to stand alone, apart from the other confessions of our church. It does not pretend to be a complete list of all our beliefs, nor does it explain any of them in detail. It is designed to be confessed by the whole congregation in the setting of public worship, and it may also serve pastors and teachers as an aid to Christian instruction. It celebrates our rediscovery that for all our undoubted diversity, we are bound together by a common faith and a common task.

The faith we confess unites us with the one, universal church. The most important beliefs of Presbyterians are those we share with other Christians, and especially with other evangelical Christians who look to the Protestant Reformation as a renewal of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Diversity remains. But we are thankful that in our time the many churches are learning to accept, and even to affirm, diversity without divisiveness, since the whole counsel of God is more than the wisdom of any individual or any one tradition. The Spirit of Truth gives new light to the churches when they are willing to become pupils together of the Word of God. This statement therefore intends to confess the catholic faith.

We are convinced that to the Reformed churches a distinctive vision of the catholic faith has been entrusted for the good of the whole church. Accordingly, "A Brief Statement of Faith" includes the major themes of the Reformed tradition (such as those mentioned in the Book of Order, Form of Government, Chapter 2), without claiming them as our

private possession, just as we ourselves hope to learn and to share the wisdom and insight given to traditions other than our own. And as a confession that seeks to be both catholic and Reformed, the statement (following the apostle's blessing in 2 Cor. 13:14) is a Trinitarian confession in which the grace of Jesus Christ has first place as the foundation of our knowledge of God's sovereign love and our life together in the Holy Spirit.

No confession of faith looks merely to the past; every confession seeks to cast the light of a priceless heritage on the needs of the present moment, and so to shape the future, Reformed confessions, in particular, when necessary even reform the tradition itself in the light of the Word of God. From the first, the Reformed churches have insisted that the renewal of the church must become visible in the transformation of human lives and societies. Hence "A Brief Statement of Faith" lifts up concerns that call most urgently for the church's attention in our time. The church is not a refuge from the world; an elect people is chosen for the blessing of the nations. A sound confession, therefore, proves itself as it nurtures commitment to the church's mission, and as the confessing church itself becomes the body by which Christ continues the blessing of his earthly ministry.

The Statement

In life and in death we belong to God.
Through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
The love of God,
And the communion of the Holy Spirit,
We trust in the one triune God, the Holy One of Israel,
Whom alone we worship and serve. We trust in Jesus Christ,
Fully human, fully God.
Jesus proclaimed the reign of God
Preaching good news to the poor
And release to the captives,
Teaching by word and deed
And blessing the children,
Healing the sick
And binding up the brokenhearted,
Eating with outcasts,
Forgiving sinners,
And calling all to repent and believe the gospel
Unjustly condemned for blasphemy and sedition,
Jesus was crucified,
Suffering the depths of human pain
And giving his life for the sins of the world.
God raised Jesus from the dead,
Vindicating his sinless life,
Breaking the power of sin and evil,
Delivering us from death to life eternal.
We trust in God, whom Jesus called Abba, Father.
In sovereign love God created the world good

And makes everyone equally God's image
Male and female, of every race and people,
To live as one community.
But we rebel against God; we hide from our Creator.
Ignoring God's commandments,
We violate the image of God in others and ourselves,
Accept lies as truth,
Exploit neighbor and nature,
And threaten death to the planet entrusted to our care.
We deserve God's condemnation,

Yet God acts with justice and mercy to redeem creation.
In everlasting love,
The God of Abraham and Sarah chose a covenant people
To bless all families of the earth.
Hearing their cry,
God delivered the children of Israel
From the house of bondage.
Loving us still,
God makes us heirs with Christ of the covenant.
Like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child,
Like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home,
God is faithful still. We trust in God the Holy Spirit,
Everywhere the giver and renewer of life.
The Spirit justifies us by grace through faith,
Sets us free to accept ourselves and to love God and neighbor,
And binds us together with all believers
In the one body of Christ, the church.
The same Spirit
Who inspired the prophets and apostles
Rules our faith and life in Christ through Scripture,
Engages us through the Word proclaimed,
Claims us in the waters of baptism,
Feeds us with the bread of life and the cup of salvation,
And calls women and men to all ministries of the church.
In a broken and fearful world
The Spirit gives us courage
To pray without ceasing,
To witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and savior,
To unmask idolatries in church and culture,
To hear the voices of peoples long silenced,
And to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace.
In gratitude to God, empowered by the Spirit,
We strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks
And to live holy and joyful lives,
Even as we watch for God's new heaven and new earth,

Praying, Come Lord Jesus! With believers in every time and place,
We rejoice that nothing in life or in death
Can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.
Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit.
Amen

➤ Jesus

Presbyterians believe Jesus was...

Fully human, fully God.

Jesus proclaimed the reign of God;

Preaching good news to the poor and release to the captives, teaching by word and deed
And blessing the children, healing the sick, and binding up the brokenhearted, eating with
outcasts, forgiving sinners and calling all to repent and believe the gospel. Unjustly
condemned for blasphemy and sedition, Jesus was crucified, suffering the depths of
human pain and giving his life for the sins of the world. God raised Jesus from the dead,
vindicating his sinless life, breaking the power of sin and evil, delivering us from death to
life eternal. [Brief Statement of Faith (Lines 8-26)]

Jesus was born of a woman—Mary; in a particular place—the Middle East; to a particular
people—the Jews. He was born as a helpless infant who hungered, cried, had to be
changed and grew as all babies grow. As a grown man, Jesus knew all of the feelings
humans know—joy, sadness, discouragement, loneliness and longing. Yet, Jesus also
trusted completely in God and was without sin.

Jesus' actual ministry on earth was short—approximately three years. Because his
teachings challenged powerful religious and government leaders, he was executed as a
dangerous and seditious criminal. He died, was buried, and was resurrected by God. For
Christians, this resurrection is God's most amazing miracle and proof that Jesus was
indeed divine.

We believe that Jesus is as alive today as he was on the first Easter morning and that he is
present with us today, even though we cannot see him or physically touch him. We call
Jesus "Lord" because he has saved us from the power of death and the power of sin and
because, through His sacrifice, we are able to know the fullness of God's love for us.
Christians also believe that Jesus will one day return to the earth to complete the task of
creating a world where justice, peace and love rule and evil is no more. To those who
believe in Christ, such an event is seen not with fear but with joyful anticipation.
Because Jesus showed that not even death can stop God's purpose and God's activity, we
know that we have life and hope forever.

➤ The Holy Spirit

"We trust in the one triune God, the Holy One of Israel, whom alone we worship and
serve; Glory be to the Father, and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit. Amen

(Brief statement of Faith lines 5-6, 80)

The triune God is the creator of the universe; the savior of the world who has been revealed as the perfect model of humanity in Jesus Christ; and is the ongoing presence and power of God in the world.

Biblical References

On Pentecost, the seventh Sunday after Easter, Christians commemorate the coming of the Holy Spirit to Jesus' early followers. But the Bible contains several earlier references to the Spirit as well—for example, in the accounts of Mary's conception, "...she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 1:18) and "The Holy Spirit will come upon you..." (Luke 1:35); Jesus' baptism: "...he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him" (Matthew 3:16); and Jesus sending his disciples out for the first time. "...do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say...for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you" (Matthew 10:19-20).

Through the Holy Spirit, God empowers us to grow in faith, make more mature decisions and live more faithful lives. The Spirit gives us the will, as Jesus said, to "be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). The Holy Spirit gives believers the authority to accurately interpret the Bible, just as the Spirit enabled the original writers of Scripture to tell truthfully about God, Jesus and everything else we need to know. The Spirit also gives authority to the church to act in God's name for the good of humanity. The Spirit gives every person a sense of "calling" to a special function in the world, in keeping with God's providence and Jesus' summons to "follow him." Among the "fruits of the spirit" identified by the apostle Paul are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. (Galatians 5:22)

➤ Presbyterian Confessions

The Westminster Confession of Faith, a historic Presbyterian document, refers to the Holy Spirit as a source of God's grace and "the only efficient agent in the application of redemption." For all humans, the confession says, the Spirit "convicts them of sin, moves them to repentance and persuades and enables them to embrace Jesus Christ by faith." It further states that God is willing to give the Spirit to all who ask.

The Brief Statement of Faith, the most recent Presbyterian confessional document also speaks about the Holy Spirit.

We trust in God the Holy Spirit, everywhere the giver and renewer of life. The Spirit justifies us by grace through faith, sets us free to accept ourselves and to love God and neighbor, and binds us together with all believers in the one body of Christ, the Church. The same Spirit who inspired the prophets and apostles rules our faith and life in Christ through Scripture, engages us through the Word proclaimed, claims us in the waters of baptism, feeds us with the bread of life and the cup of salvation, and calls women and

men to all ministries of the Church. In a broken and fearful world the Spirit gives us courage to pray without ceasing, to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior, to unmask idolatries in Church and culture, to hear the voices of peoples long silenced, and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace.

➤ [What is the Bible?](#)

The Bible is a collection of 66 individual books that together tell the story of a group of people bound by a common faith in God. It is divided into two main sections: the Old Testament containing 39 books originally written primarily in Hebrew, and the New Testament containing 27 books originally written primarily in Greek. For Presbyterians and others of the Reformed tradition the Bible is the means by which Christian believers come to understand how God has been present with humanity since the beginning of time and is present in our world today. By studying the scriptures we can begin to know of God's faithfulness, constant love and eternal goodness.

Testaments

Old Testament: The Old Testament tells the story of God's covenant with the Hebrew people. It is regarded as sacred scripture by both Jews and Christians.

New Testament: The New Testament contains four accounts of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the account of the earliest Christian churches and other writings from the early Christian era. It is considered sacred scripture by Christians.

Translations

The Bible has been translated from its original languages into the languages of people throughout the world. The first translation into English was by John Wycliffe in the 14th century. Since that time, there have been a myriad of English translations. One of the most familiar, the King James Version (KJB), was commissioned by James I of England and published in 1611. Although the language of the King James Bible reflected the everyday speech of England in the 17th century, changes in speech patterns and the meaning of certain words have made it more difficult to understand than more modern translations. Since the 1950's, there have been many translations of the Bible into contemporary English. Translations frequently used by Presbyterians in their worship services include the Revised Standard Version (RSV) and the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). Both are considered excellent translations that are faithful to the original texts insofar as scholars can determine.

Presbyterian Practice

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.

Leaders in the Presbyterian Church (USA) can be expected to affirm that "...the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments...(are)..., by the Holy Spirit, the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the Church universal, and God's Word to (them)."

➤ Sin and Salvation

Presbyterians believe the Bible when it says that "all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:23) Unlike crime, which involves the breaking of human law, sin is a condition of the heart or an expression of that condition where we are estranged from God and fail to trust in God. Sin expresses itself in particular acts. The Brief Statement of Faith of the Presbyterian Church (USA) says:

"But we rebel against God; we hide from our Creator,
Ignoring God's commandments,
We violate the image of God in others and ourselves,
Accept lies as truth,
Exploit neighbor and nature,
And threaten death to the planet entrusted to our care.
We deserve God's condemnation." [Lines 33-39]

"Yet God acts with justice and mercy to redeem creation.
Loving us still,
God makes us heirs with Christ of the covenant.
Like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child,
Like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home,
God is faithful still." [Lines 40, 47-51]

God has always been faithful to the people of Israel and to the church. Presbyterians believe God has offered us salvation because of God's loving nature. It is not a right or a privilege to be earned by being "good enough." No one of us is good enough on our own—we are all dependent upon God's goodness and mercy. From the kindest, most devoted churchgoer to the most blatant sinner, we are all saved solely by the grace of God.

Out of the greatest possibly love and compassion God reached out to us and redeemed us through Jesus Christ, the only one who was ever without sin. Through Jesus' death and resurrection God triumphed over sin.

Presbyterians believe it is through the action of God working in us that we become aware of our sinfulness and our need for God's mercy and forgiveness. Just as a parent is quick to welcome a wayward child who has repented of rebellion, God is willing to forgive our sins if we but confess them and ask for forgiveness in the name of Christ.

God further sent the Holy Spirit to be our companion, counselor and guide in living a life of service to God.

“The Spirit justifies us by grace through faith,
Sets us free to accept ourselves and to love God and neighbor,
And binds us together with all believers
In the one body of Christ, the church.”
(Brief Statement of Faith, Lines 54-57)

All quotation marks (other than those noted as referenced by another source) represent statements from “Book of Order, The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Part II, 2005/2007

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