

What Presbyterians Believe



by Beth Herrinton-Hodge

I recall a friend in seminary remarking, "The only thing you have to believe, as a Presbyterian, is the original, biblical confession—'Jesus Christ is Lord.'" While it's true that Presbyterians are united with all Christians in our belief in the Lordship of Jesus Christ, we claim a number of beliefs and practices that mark a distinct and unique corner of Protestant Christianity.

Presbyterian

Our form of church leadership and governance inspired the name "Presbyterian." God calls and the congregation elects elders (also called presbyters) to serve as leaders for a congregation. Both teaching elders (ministers of Word and Sacrament) and ruling elders serve as representatives to church governing units—session, presbytery, synod and General Assembly (*The Presbyterian Handbook*, 54).

God's Sovereignty

Our faith rests on the sovereignty and grace of God. God alone is the holy One: all-powerful, all-knowing, all-loving, all-just; the One who creates, sustains, rules and redeems creation. God's providence is God's guidance and work in history and in the lives of individuals (*The Presbyterian Handbook*, 178).

Learn More!

- Genesis 1, Revelation 21
- Scots Confession, 3.01; Westminster Confession of Faith, 6.011–6.012

Triune God: Father/Creator, Son/Christ, Holy Spirit

Like other Christians, Presbyterians believe in a "triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—[who] creates, redeems, sustains, rules, and transforms all things and all people" (*Book of Order*, F-1.01).

We know God by what is revealed in scripture, in the incarnation (life, death and resurrection) of Jesus Christ, and in the ongoing presence and work of the Holy Spirit in our lives, in the church and in the world. The three persons of the Trinity are one inextricable and interconnected community, fully known and fully realized as one God of all.

Learn More!

- Triune God: Matthew 28:19; God, Father: John 17:25–26; Son, Christ: John 1:18; Holy Spirit: John 14:26
- Second Helvetic Confession, 5.015–5.018; Heidelberg Catechism, 4.024 and 4.025; Westminster Confession of Faith, 6.013

Atonement

Martin Luther stated that God comes to humans in our sinful state and declares us forgiven and accepted through the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ. Presbyterians recognize

- Christ took on the necessary punishment for human sin through his death on the cross, paying the price we owe to a just God (Rom. 5:8).
- Jesus defeated death by his resurrection to new life (Luke 24:1–12, and parallels), opening the possibility of new life to each of us.
- Christ lived and taught of a transformed life, fully conscious of his relationship with God and fully reflecting and obeying God's will.

These atoning actions—authored by God and embodied by Christ—allow us to remain in transformational relationship with God. God does not leave us in our sinful state without hope (*The Encyclopedia of the Reformed Faith*, 336–338, 351).

Learn More!

- Scots Confession, 3.08–3.09; Heidelberg Catechism, 4.037; Confession of 1967, 9.08

Sin and Depravity

From the creation accounts in Genesis, we understand that God created all that exists and called it good. Yet, humans are prone to sin, making choices that separate humanity from God and each other. Sin perverts the good things God desires and provides. Because of sin, humans know toil, pain, misery and estrangement. Every human action is at least partially skewed, no matter how well-intentioned. This is depravity (*Encyclopedia of the Reformed Faith*, 350).

Learn More!

- Genesis 1–3; James 4:17
- Second Helvetic 5.036–5.037



Covenant

Throughout the Bible, God continually reaches out to be in relationship with people. God initiates covenant, promising to be our God and calling us as God's own. Even when people turn from God or break covenant with God, God stays with us and provides a means to restore relationship, revealing God's steadfast love and grace.

We see covenants throughout scripture. God stood by Adam and Eve, even when they disobeyed God (Gen. 2:7–3:21). God reached out to Abraham and Sarah, promising them a land and numerous descendants who would call God "God" (17:1–7). God gave the Ten Commandments to Moses as a seal of the people's relationship with God and as a guide for living faithfully with God and with each other (Ex. 19:3–20:17). God sent prophets to call people back to the covenant God established with them. God offered God's people a new, everlasting covenant through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Christ's blood seals God's promise of forgiveness and eternal life in relationship with God (Lk. 22:14–20).

Learn More!

- Psalm 89 and 105; Jeremiah 31:31–34; Galatians 3:25–29
- Westminster Confession of Faith, 6.037–6.042; Scots Confession, 3.04; Confession of 1967, 9.18

Scripture

We believe that scripture is "the Word of God written, witnessing to God's self-revelation. . . . The reading, hearing, preaching, and confessing of the Word are central to Christian worship" (*Book of Order*, W-2.2001).

Both the Old and New Testaments contain testimony of God's work with and through God's people across generations. In reading and studying scripture and in hearing and proclaiming God's word, people come to know God and God's desire for relationship with people and with creation. In scripture, people witness God creating, providing, loving and continually reaching out to God's people—

entering into covenant with us, showing mercy, forgiving and welcoming us into relationship with God and with one another.

Learn More!

- 2 Timothy 3:14–17; 1 Thessalonians 2:13
- Second Helvetic, 5.001–5.002; Confession of 1967, 9.30

Sacraments

“The Reformed tradition understands Baptism and the Lord’s Supper to be Sacraments, instituted by God and commended by Christ” (*Book of Order*, W-1.3033). The sacraments are visible, tangible signs of God’s action and Christ’s self-offering. They are outward signs of God’s invisible grace, truth and reality.

“The early Church, following Jesus, took three primary material elements of life—water, bread, and wine [fruit of the vine]—to become basic symbols” of the Sacraments (*Book of Order*, W-1.3033). These common elements from life, when blessed and shared

in Christian community, seals believers in God’s presence, in communion with Jesus Christ, and with one another by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Learn More!

- Baptism: Matthew 28:16-20; Communion (Lord’s Supper): Matthew 26:26-29
- Scots Confession, 3:21; Westminster Confession, 6.149–6.153; Heidelberg Catechism, 4.066–4.068

God Alone is Lord of the Conscience

An important mark of Presbyterians is our respect for an individual’s independent and private judgment, understanding that one’s conscience is informed by a relationship with God and Jesus Christ, and guided by the Holy Spirit and Scripture. Our *Book of Order* states, “God alone is lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of [all persons] which are in anything contrary to [God’s] Word, or beside it, in matters of faith or worship” (F-3.0101).

Learn More!

- Acts 5:29; Galatians 5:1
- Westminster Confession of Faith, 6.109

Saved by God’s Grace through Faith in Jesus Christ

Presbyterians believe that we are saved by the grace of God—a free and undeserved gift—through our faith in Jesus Christ. Our salvation depends upon God’s sovereign will and God’s grace-filled covenant with us. God calls us to salvation; it is not our own doing. God invites us to respond to this call by placing our faith in Jesus Christ, confessing our sin and our need for God’s grace and forgiveness, and living in loving relationship with God and others.

Learn More!

- Romans 5; John 3:16–17; Ephesians 2:1–9



Responding to God: Gratitude

God’s steadfast love, grace, forgiveness and relationship with us are freely given. Christians respond to God’s good gifts with gratitude, love, acceptance, humility, obedience and faith. God desires to be our God and to count us as God’s own.

Our grateful response to God’s covenant with us can be summed up in the Great Commandments: to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and love our neighbor as our self (Matt. 22:36–40).

Learn More!

- Heidelberg Catechism, 4.086

Responding to God: Worship, Education and Mission

The Shorter Catechism begins with a clear proclamation: Our “chief end is to glorify God and enjoy God forever” (Shorter Catechism, 7.001).

Our *Book of Order* notes (F-1.0302d) that the life and work of a Christian includes:

- making disciples of all nations in the name of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit;
- sharing with others a deep life of worship, prayer, fellowship and service;
- participating in God’s mission to care for needs of sick, poor, lonely; to free people from sin, suffering and oppression; to establish Christ’s just, loving and peaceable rule in the world.

Learn More!

- Ephesians 4:1–16
- Heidelberg, 4:116; Confession of 1967, 9.31–9.33; Brief Statement of Faith, 10.4



Representative Government

A unique aspect of Presbyterian churches is our representative government. Each congregation elects its leaders (ruling elders), who work with teaching elders (ministers of Word and Sacrament) as a session to guide and lead a congregation. Together, these leaders are responsible for the life of a local church.

Teaching and ruling elders are elected or appointed to come together in councils of the larger church. Congregations are connected to one another as the presbyters serve both their congregation and the larger church. Power is shared jointly by presbyters who gather in councils (presbyteries, synods,

General Assembly). Care is taken to have an equal number of teaching and ruling elders participate in governing bodies beyond the local session.

We hold to Jesus' statement: "Where two or three are gathered, I am present with them" (Matt. 18:20). Thus, Presbyterian governance and decision-making happen within councils, where two or more gather to discern God's will. Decisions in councils are made by vote, following discussion and prayerful discernment.

Learn More!

- 1 Timothy 3:1–13; 1 Corinthians 12:28
- Westminster Confession of Faith, 6.169 and 6.173–6.176; Confession of 1967, 9.40

Ecumenical Relationships

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) affirms its historical continuity with the whole Church of Jesus Christ, is committed to unity in Christ, and is willing to seek and to develop communion with all other churches within the one holy catholic and apostolic Church. The Church seeks to include all people and is never content to enjoy the benefits of Christian community for itself alone (Book of Order, F-1.0302a).

Learn More!

- Ephesians 2:11–22; 4:1–16
- Confession of 1967, 9.41–9.42

Confessional

"The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) consists of *The Book of Confessions* and the *Book of Order*" (Book of Order, F-3.04). Our *Book of Confessions* is a collection of creeds, declarations, confessions, statements of belief, and question and answer catechisms that serve to declare to the world "who and what [the church] is, what it believes, and what it resolves to do" (Book of Order, F-2.01).

Confessing one's faith differs from confessing sins to God. "In the church, 'confess' means to openly

affirm, declare, acknowledge and take a stand for what one believes to be true." ("The Confessional Nature of the Church" in *The Book of Confessions: Study Edition*, Appendix A, 354)

Learn More!

- Philippians 2:11
- Confession of 1967, 9.01 and 9.07



Church

We believe that the church is the body of Christ in the world. It is made up of people whom God calls into community to care for one another, to support and bear one another's burdens, to worship God together, to bear witness to God's presence in the world, and to participate in God's mission in the world.

The PC(USA) identifies itself with the affirmations of the Protestant Reformation and expresses the faith of the Reformed Tradition. Ours is one expression of the Reformed Tradition in the world, yet not the only expression.

From the beginning, Presbyterian and Reformed churches have sought to confess what Christians believe, using the Apostles Creed (2.1-3) and the Nicene Creed (1.1-3). The PC(USA) never claimed to be the only true church; it is one of many denominations to confess Christ as Lord and to strive to live God's mission in the world ("The Confessional Nature of the Church" in *The Book of Confessions: Study Edition*, Appendix A, 375).

Learn More!

- Ephesians 2:11-22
- Scots Confession 3.13; Heidelberg Catechism, 4.054-4.055; Second Helvetic Confession, 5.124-5.141; Confession of 1967, 9.31-9.34



Reformed, Always Reforming

Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda secundum verbum Dei. "The church reformed, always to be reformed [or always being reformed] according to the Word of God" (*Book of Order*, F-2.02). This oft-repeated phrase is central to the Presbyterian Church's dependence on God and our desire to be engaged in relevant mission in God's ever-changing world.

An important note is that the church is the object of change—of God's action—in line with God's will and with what God wants to bring about in the future. Change or reform doesn't happen simply for the sake of change. It takes place by God's active will; it is informed by Scripture and guided by God's Spirit (*The Presbyterian Handbook*, 177).

Learn More!

- Confession of 1967, 9.03 and 9.40

In truth, there is more in the Christian faith that unites us than separates us. God gifts us with creation, incarnation and an ongoing presence—the foundations of our relationship with God and with one another. In proclaiming "Jesus Christ is Lord," we join Christians across the globe in a united faith, even as we find different ways to worship God, to organize ourselves and to serve God's people. 🍷

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