



What Do Presbyterians Believe?

SESSION 1

| *What does “Presbyterian” mean? Who are Presbyterians and what do they believe?*

Who Are Presbyterians?



Presbyterians are part of a wider family. We have a family relationship with the group of churches known as Reformed churches. These churches have been around since the sixteenth century. During the Protestant Reformation in Europe, which began with Martin Luther (1483–1546), some Christians who agreed

with Luther in his criticisms of the Roman Catholic Church went on to disagree with him in other theological matters. Among those who were prominent as Protestants but not Lutherans were the leaders Huldrych Zwingli (1484–1531), John Calvin (1509–1564), and Heinrich Bullinger (1504–1575). Those who followed these leaders became known as Reformed Christians. They wanted God’s church to be reformed—to move away from unbiblical practices and to conform to what they believed the Scriptures taught. They understood their Christian faith along the lines described in the theological writings of these major leaders. Among the theologians, John Calvin became the most prominent.

While there were theological differences between the Reformed and the Lutherans, there was also a difference of opinion about the best (most “biblical”) way to structure the church. Among Reformed churches, a “presbyterian” form of church government arose. Local congregations are governed by “elders,” a term that is the meaning of the Greek word *presbuteros*, from which “presbyter” is derived. The central governing body for groups of churches is the “presbytery,” which is made

up of both ministers and elder representatives of local congregations. The name Presbyterian became descriptive of these churches. Presbyteries related both to local churches and to governing bodies of a wider geographical area, called synods, and also to the General Assembly, which is the representative body for the group of churches (denomination) as a whole. The “presbyterian system” is often said to correspond to the parts of the United States government: local church (city), presbytery (county), synod (state), and General Assembly (national).

Reformed churches with a presbyterian system of government spread throughout Europe and into the New World in the centuries after the Protestant Reformation. They were united by a form of church government, but there were groups of churches that called themselves Reformed—because they adhered to the theologies of Zwingli and Calvin—but who adopted a congregational church government form. Here the local church itself, alone, is the place of authority. So Reformed churches have adopted either a presbyterian or a congregational church government form. What unites them in a “family” beyond the differences in church government is their commitment to the way in which God’s revelation in Holy Scripture, centered in Jesus Christ, has been understood by the various Reformed theological leaders and different Reformed confessions of faith.

Presbyterians are part of the wider Reformed family, looking to important theological leaders and also to the ways in which Reformed people from earlier times to the present day have expressed their Christian faith

in confessions or declarations of faith. In the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), one of a number of Presbyterian churches in the United States, what the church believes is found in the *Book of Confessions*. This is a collection of statements of Christian faith from the early church period (Nicene Creed, Apostles' Creed), the Reformation era (Scots Confession, Heidelberg Catechism, Second Helvetic Confession, Westminster Confession of Faith, and Shorter and Larger Catechisms), and contemporary times (Theological Declaration of Barmen, Confession of 1967, and A Brief Statement of Faith). Wherever Reformed people have been, they have desired to say what they believe about who God is and what God does. The theological statements that have resulted are looked to today by other Reformed Christians as instructive ways to articulate and express their Christian beliefs.

Presbyterians are part of the larger Reformed family. There are over 75 million Reformed Christians in 218 churches in 107 countries who belong to the umbrella organization called the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is the largest of at least nine Presbyterian denominations in the United States. It was formed by the 1983 merger of two Presbyterian bodies that had split apart during the U.S. Civil War, primarily over the issue of slavery.

Presbyterians have always been concerned with theology. Theology is the way we articulate our faith and express what we believe. So Presbyterians have taken theology seriously—sometimes, unfortunately, so “seriously” that they have further split the body of Christ by forming more and more Presbyterian denominations. While Presbyterians differ theologically among themselves, there are distinctive theological affirmations, or ways of understanding Christian faith, that have been and continue to be special emphases among Presbyterians. Our study now will look at what Presbyterians believe.

What Do Presbyterians Believe?

Bible

Presbyterians believe that God exists and that God has been revealed to humanity. God is the creator of all things. God's creative work is expressed all around us. But not everyone recognizes God's activity and what

God has done in this world. Presbyterians believe this nonrecognition is due to human sin. Humans need a revelation of God that will impact their lives! So God has reached out to the world to provide not only a general revelation—of what God has done, in the creation of the world and in nature and history—but also a special revelation, which is the Bible. The Bible is God's self-revelation, or God's self-communication. God revealed who God is to the people of Israel in the Old Testament (the Hebrew Scriptures) and supremely to the people of the church in the New Testament—in the person of Jesus Christ. The Bible is special revelation in that it conveys a knowledge of God that we would not have had through any other means and a knowledge of God that we cannot find in any other place. The Bible is called the Word of God. The Scriptures express who God is and what God does, as well as what God desires for the world and for humanity. The Bible is the expression of God's will. It tells the story of God's activities in the created world and with the people of God throughout the Old and New Testaments.

So Presbyterians believe in the authority of Scripture. It is to Scripture we turn as the place to hear God speak and read God's Word. We believe God's Holy Spirit inspired biblical writers to convey what God wanted conveyed so humans will know who God is and love and serve God the way God intends. We perceive the Bible to be the Word of God by the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. The Spirit gives us the gift of faith in Jesus Christ, who is known to us through the Scriptures, and the Spirit witnesses to us that the Bible is God's special revelation, God's Word—the means God uses to convey the knowledge of God and God's will to us. This is why the Bible is so central to Presbyterian beliefs and practices.

God

The Bible tells us of a God who created the world and who loves the world. This is the central story of the Scriptures. It is important to believe that God exists; it is even more important to know the nature of this God in whom we believe. The God revealed in Scripture is a God who takes the initiative in communicating with humanity and in calling people into a relationship of love and obedience. Presbyterians emphasize that God is a “covenant God.” A covenant is a promise, or an agreement. Throughout the Bible we find God entering into covenants with individuals and groups. There were

covenants with Abraham and Sarah, with the people of Israel, with King David, and with others. In a covenant, God pledges and promises things that are important. Humans may also make promises in covenants: to obey God, to be faithful to what God desires. The fulfillment of all biblical covenants, we believe, is Jesus Christ. God sent Jesus Christ into the world to reach out to the world in love, and through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, humanity can have the relationship with God that God desires and intends. Presbyterians emphasize, with other Christians, that Jesus Christ is the one to whom the whole Old Testament points, as the promised Messiah, and the one in whom all the promises of God find their fulfillment. We know and believe in Jesus Christ by the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives, who gives us the gift of faith.

The covenant God we know in Scripture is the living God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This central



Christian conviction is that God is one God in three persons. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all fully and equally God. They are intimately related to each other as God, by the relationship of love. They are one God, but they are three persons. That is,

the one personal God lives and works in three different ways at the same time. God is the one divine reality whom we know as three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Presbyterian theology, like Christian theology, begins with the triune God. The Trinity is the basis for understanding who God is. The three persons are one God. Who we see in Jesus Christ is God. What we see the Holy Spirit do is God. The God who is revealed in the Old Testament is God. All the work of God is one work in that it is carried out by the one God. But God works as three divine persons, united in the divine love. The Bible distinguishes the work of the persons of the Godhead. But we believe in and worship, as the hymn says, “God in three persons, blessed Trinity.”

Creation and Providence

The God who is at the very foundation of our lives and who is the eternal God revealed in Scripture is the God who created all things and sustains and guides all things according to divine purposes.

We meet this affirmation in the first verse of the Bible: “God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1). God created all things, “visible and invisible,” as the Nicene Creed affirms. All the created order owes its existence to God and belongs to God. This includes the universe around us and we humans within it. We are born and given the breath of life—by God. God desires us to live our lives in the relationship of love that is described in the first two chapters of the book of Genesis, where humans have a fellowship and communion with God that is blessed. To acknowledge God as our creator is to acknowledge our dependence on God, our need to trust in God, and our responsibility in this life to live as God desires—being responsible for taking care of the earth, living in relationships of love with others, and seeking to do God’s will in all things.

Presbyterians believe that God created all things and also that God sustains and guides all things. This is called the doctrine of Providence. God upholds the creation by God’s power. If God created all things and then walked away, everything would collapse! God’s ongoing preserving power is needed to support the creation. But even more, Presbyterians believe that God is also involved in creation. One part of providence is that God cooperates with the people whom God created to work in the world to accomplish God’s divine purposes. Humans can have a relationship with God that enables us to share in God’s work and carry out God’s will. God’s divine will is the power and purpose behind the universe. The fantastic news of the Christian faith that Presbyterians share is that humans can participate in the divine purposes! God can use even us to carry out God’s will for creation and the human family. This enables our lives themselves to have purpose and meaning; we are participating in God’s work in this world. We can trust God’s plan and live lives in which we look to God to guide and direct us. God’s ultimate purposes will be fulfilled as history emerges. We believe that God’s ultimate reign will be established. But on our way to the future, we can trust God’s providence to sustain the world and to draw us into God’s purposes, because by the work of the Holy Spirit, God guides our lives and the life of the world.

Humanity and Sin

Our Presbyterian beliefs in God as creator, sustainer, and the one who guides our life raise big questions about the

nature of human life itself. Who are we created to be? Who are we? What does it mean that I am created as a unique individual? What is the purpose of my life?

Presbyterians have emphasized certain dimensions of our lives as human beings. Since we are created by God and belong to God, then God is concerned with the totality of our lives. In the Old Testament and in the New Testament, as Jesus said, we are to love God with our heart, our soul, our mind and strength (Mark 12:29–30). We are to love God with our full human existence. God created us as whole persons. Our lives are to reflect our creation and our creator. God wants us to be devoted in our love for God, with our whole selves. This is important because it means our relationship with God has to do with all dimensions of our lives—every part of our lives, every day. There are no parts of us in which God is not interested! So also we will care for others in the fullness of their lives too—be concerned about their physical as well as their spiritual well-being. This view is an important perspective for churches carrying out ministries.

Presbyterians have also emphasized the biblical teaching that humans are created in the “image of God” (Gen. 1:26–27). We are created by God and in the image of God. This has far-reaching implications. We are to be image bearers—conveying God to other people. We are to represent God to others. Another way to say it is that we are to image God. When people see us, they should be reminded of the creator who created us in love and created us in order to love other people. Relatedly, when we look at others, we are to see them as fellow creatures who are also created in the image of God. Outward dimensions—race, gender, social or economic location—are not the important facts about others. The most important thing we can say is that others are created in the image of God. We are called by God to recognize the image of God in other persons. To do so is to affirm our central conviction that we all stand as equal persons who bear the divine image.

But our views of who we are do not stop there. Christians affirm, and Presbyterians have also emphasized, that

the divine image of God in God’s creatures has been distorted. It has been disturbed. It has been fractured. Humans, as we know ourselves and others today, are not the people we should be. We have turned against the purposes of God for our lives, we have lived lives focused on ourselves rather than loving God and others, and we have resisted living in the ways God wants us in seeking justice, showing love, and pursuing peace.

These are expressions of what the Bible calls sin. Sin is our rebellion against God, our choosing to pursue our own paths instead of God’s, and our desires to live our own wills instead of seeking the will of God. Sometimes, however, we sin in that we try to hide from God; we shrink back from loving God and from the relationships and service God desires. The Bible uses many images to describe human sinfulness. Humans are sinners in what we do and in who we are. We have broken the image of God and now do not reflect God or represent God to others. As our Brief Statement of Faith puts it: “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” (*Book of Confessions*, 10.3).

Theologically, our sinful condition is called original sin. It means that in our origins as human beings, sin has played a role, and now all persons find themselves to be sinners, in need of God’s forgiveness, mercy, and grace. Our sin affects the totality of our lives. We cannot, on our own, establish the relationship with God that God wants us to have. We cannot, because our lives are oriented away from God and toward ourselves so that we do not desire to live otherwise. The results are that our loves, our choices, our whole life’s directions are turned in upon ourselves and turned away from God’s purposes for us. We cannot change our natures by ourselves. We need divine help if we are to find forgiveness, freedom from guilt and sin. In short, we need a savior.

About the Writer

Donald K. McKim is academic and reference editor for Westminster John Knox Press. He is the author and editor of a number of books about Reformed theology and beliefs.