



Historical perspective

The roots of the Presbyterian Church go all the way back to Protestant Reformation, led by Martin Luther. In 1517, Martin Luther nailed 95 “theses” or questions for discussion on the church door (the town bulletin board) of his town in Wittenburg, Germany. Because of the recent invention of the printing press, within two weeks Luther’s disagreements with existing church doctrine were circulating all over Europe. The Protestant Reformation had begun.

The new reforms within the church soon attracted a bright young student in France, named John Calvin. Calvin, a lawyer by trade, wrote a brilliant articulation of this “reformed” faith, at age 29. He called it, The Institutes of the Christian Religion. People now refer to it as Calvin’s Institutes. His work attracted great attention because of its insight, depth, and clarity. Calvin eventually would settle in the town of Geneva, Switzerland and become an important figure in the new reformation of the church. The Presbyterian Church today finds its theological roots in the writings of John Calvin.

The first Presbyterian Church was organized in America in the early 1700’s in Philadelphia. Just preceding the Civil War, the church broke into two separate denominations, which reunited in 1983. Our denomination’s official name is the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A). This is the “mainline” Presbyterian denomination a body of 2.6 million believers in 11,000 congregations.

Our Form of Church Government

The word “Presbyterian” comes from the Bible, from the Greek word for “elder.” The Presbyterian denomination takes its name from its form of church government, which is to be governed by elders. There are various types of church government, such as “hierarchical” – the Roman Catholic, Episcopal and Methodist churches; “congregational” – Baptist and Congregational churches; and “representative” – Presbyterian Churches.

The Presbyterian Church is a representative form of church government in which the congregation elects church officers to lead the congregation. The Presbyterian Church is representative at every level – Congregations elect elders to serve on the Session, Sessions elect commissioners to go to Presbytery meetings, and Presbyteries elect commissioners to go to Synod and General Assembly meetings.

Our nation's government was patterned after the Presbyterian representative model. Elders in the Presbyterian Church seek to discern the will of God for a congregation and vote their conscience before God. Our congregation has three classes of four elders serving on a rotating basis. Congregational elections for new elders are held each year, generally in the fall. All members of the congregation are entitled to vote on the electing of their officers.

What Presbyterians Believe

Presbyterians Are:

- **Protestant.** We come from the protestant Reformation that began in the 1500's with the theological thought of Martin Luther and John Calvin.
- **Reformed and always being reformed.** We try to always reform our life and practice, both individually and corporately, according to the teachings of scriptures.
- **Saved to share the good news with the world around us.** Missions have always been a strong emphasis of our denomination. We are committed to living out Jesus' commandment to "love one another" and share the good news of the gospel with others.
- **Bible centered.** The scriptures of the Old and New Testament are our only authoritative guide for faith and life.
- **Yielded to God for God's work in the world.** This means being good stewards of God's creation. It means working for peace and justice. We seek to change unjust social structures where they exist.
- **Thinkers of our faith.** We believe that God has given us minds to use for his service. We believe that the life of the mind is a service to God. Therefore, we study our faith in order to love God with our mind, as well as our heart and soul. We value Christian Education for all ages.
- **Encouraged by what we believe God can do.** Presbyterians tend to balance an undue pessimism about the world with a sense that, through the presence and work of God's Holy Spirit, all things are possible. We pray for and work for the kingdom of God in the world, knowing that all good things ultimately come from God.
- **Relying on God's grace by faith for our salvation.** It is not our works, nor our righteousness that saves us. Our salvation is by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ. No matter how much good we do, we are always sinners saved by grace.
- **Inspired to worship God in all we do.** Worship is our #1 priority. Our primary reason for existence is to "glorify God and enjoy him forever". We make personal prayer a priority and regularly gather to worship with God's people.
- **Attached to one another by bonds of love.** Every person matters to God. Every person's gift is needed in the church. Everyone is of value and worth in God's sight. We believe that the church is built up by the exercise of God's peoples' spiritual gifts therefore we encourage everyone to find a place to serve.
- **Never afraid to adjust our organizational practices in order to share the gospel more effectively.** We are slow to change our theology, but quick to change our practices when it helps us take the unchanging gospel into a rapidly changing world.

Presbyterians Principles

Presbyterians believe in a sovereign God.

The Presbyterian Church has a strong view of the majesty, power, and omnipotence of God. This informs many things we do. Our worship is reverent and seeks to focus our hearts and minds on God. We believe God works in peoples' hearts in God's own timing and therefore we do not try to orchestrate the when's and how's of people's salvation. The belief in a sovereign God is also foundational to the difficult and often misunderstood doctrine of predestination. Predestination states, simply put, that God chooses us first before we ever even think about responding to God. God's choice and our response complete our salvation.

Presbyterians are formed and reformed by the Bible.

Presbyterians believe in the Bible and use it as the unique and authoritative guide for how to live and what to believe. The sermons on Sunday try to explain and interpret the Bible rather than the preacher's latest ideas. We encourage people to read the Bible in their own devotional times and participate in group-settings such as Sunday School and Wednesday evening classes. For Presbyterians the Bible is not just to be read by preachers and scholars. We believe that the Bible is so clear, in its major themes and principles, that everybody can understand the story of salvation, primarily by reading the Bible in a regular and consistent discipline.

Presbyterians are a people of community.

Presbyterians believe that you cannot live the Christian life effectively apart from other people. God has given us the church for our mutual support, correction, and encouragement. We need a relationship with other Christians in order to be all that God intends us to be. This is one of the reasons the Presbyterian Church has a connectional form of church government. Through the Presbyteries, Synods, and the General Assembly each local congregation stays connected to the larger church. It is also one of the reasons we work together in teams for ministry. We need to do the work of Christ with other people. We believe God calls people to be connected with a local congregation and church membership is the way we recognize and celebrate that calling.

Presbyterians are a people of mission.

Presbyterians believe that we cannot simply live in our own sheltered world. God has called us to take the gospel to the entire world. God has called us to exhibit the kingdom of Christ to our community. The Presbyterian Church sends missionaries into all corners of the globe, through the regular offerings of local churches. Our denomination has been instrumental in taking the gospel to many other countries in this century. Each local congregation participates in mission activities in its specific community, on a national level, and on a global scale. Presbyterians have always looked outside themselves and their own concerns to work to fulfill Christ's Great Commission. Today the mission field is also in our own backyard as we seek to share the gospel with the almost 50% of Americans not connected with any local church.

Presbyterians are a people of the mind

Presbyterians believe that the mind is a terrible thing to waste. God has given us our minds as gracious gifts. Our reasoning faculties ought to be trained for the service of God. This is why ministers in the Presbyterian Church are held to the highest academic standards. It is why the training of elders and Sunday School teachers is so very important in the Presbyterian church. It is why we encourage everyone to grow in knowledge of the Bible, church history, theology, and an understanding of the spiritual disciplines of the Christian life.

Presbyterians have two sacraments: Baptism and Communion

The Presbyterian Church does not have many ceremonies and rituals. This is because we do not want to distract from the two most important ceremonies Christ left to the church, Baptism and the Lord's Supper. We believe these are the only two ceremonies, which we call sacraments, which Christ instituted for the church throughout the ages.

Baptism is administered only once as a sign of our forgiveness from sin and our entrance into the family of God. We administer baptism to infants and children in anticipation of their faith and with the promise of parents to raise them in the "training and instruction of the Lord." We administer the Sacrament of Baptism to adults upon their public profession of faith.

The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper is repeated often in the Presbyterian Church. Our congregation celebrates it on the first Sunday of every month. This ceremony reminds us, over and over, that we need the spiritual nourishment Christ brings to us and that Christ, our living Savior, is present with us, now and in the future.