

What is a Presbyterian?

In the New Testament, there appears the word *Presbuteros*. The word means “elder.” This word, *presbuteros*, means the modern church has roots back in the early church in Jerusalem. Elders were, and still are, the chosen leaders of the Presbyterian congregation, and are highly regarded and esteemed for their wisdom and faith. Together, with the ordained ministers, they form the Session, the governing body of the local church. Presbyterians, then, are believers who are led by elected and ordained Elders. Presbyterians are a representative democracy, that is, ordered groups report to ordered groups.

John Calvin, of Geneva, Switzerland, in the 1500s, is called the father of Presbyterianism. The Scottish Protestant, John Knox, studied with Calvin and brought the Presbyterian Church to Scotland in 1559. Escaping religious persecution in Europe, the Presbyterians came to America, including John Witherspoon, who signed the Declaration of Independence. Presbyterians are Trinitarian. That is, they believe in God manifest in three persons: the sovereignty of God, the Lordship of Jesus Christ as the Son of God, and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the presence of God in the world, and in the believer. Presbyterians believe in the authority of the Bible as the source of faith and practice and that there is an inseparable connection with faith and practice, truth and duty. Presbyterians also are led by Creeds and Confessions, such as the Apostles’ Creed, as statements of accepted doctrine and belief. Presbyterians recognize two sacraments: Baptism and Holy Communion.

In the local church, Presbyterians are a fellowship of women, men, teenagers and children, voluntarily covenanted in a relationship with each other and with God, through the Holy Spirit, sharing life in common. Freedom and responsibility are the two parts of the legacy of the Presbyterian denomination. Through church membership, Presbyterians live a holy fellowship, as a family of faith, centered in Worship and other activities, witnessing to their reverence for God, and their discipleship of Jesus Christ, head of the Church. Especially characteristic of Presbyterians is their devotion to doing all things, decently and in order, through thorough study, scriptural guidance and prayerful thinking.

What We Believe

We are a church with a strong Presbyterian heritage and a member of the Presbyterian Church (USA), which has approximately 2.5 million members, 11,200 congregations and 21,000 ordained ministers. Presbyterians trace their history to the 16th century and the Protestant Reformation. Our spiritual heritage, and the origins 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.

Listed below you will find a summary of our beliefs that all Christians share and the Presbyterian beliefs that makes us distinct from other denominations.

Essential Christian Beliefs

GOD: There is one God, the Creator and Ruler of the universe. Genesis shows that God brought all things into existence and specifically created men and women. God eternally exists in three persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. These three are co-equal and one. God is perfect in the attributes of holiness, love, power, knowledge, justice, and mercy.

Jesus Christ: Jesus is God's only son, who existed with God the Father from all eternity, and is co-equal with the Father. Jesus is both fully human and fully divine. He was born of the virgin, Mary. He lived a sinless human life and offered himself as the perfect sacrifice for the sins of the world by dying on a cross. He died to take the judgment of the world's sins. He arose from the dead after three days to demonstrate his power over sin and death. Jesus ascended to Heaven's glory and will return again someday to earth to reign as King of kings and Lord of lords.

The Holy Spirit: The Holy Spirit is the Third-Person of the Trinity and co-equal with God the Father and the Son. On Pentecost, the seventh Sunday after Easter, Christians commemorate the coming of the Holy Spirit to Jesus' followers. The Holy Spirit empowers believers to grow personally closer to God, make more mature decisions and live more faithful lives. The Holy Spirit gives believers the ability to understand the Bible, just as it enabled the original writers of Scripture to tell truthfully about God, Jesus and everything else we need to know. Through the Spirit every believer is given a sense of "calling" as a disciple to a special function in the world according to Jesus' summons to "follow him." Among the results of the Spirit's work in our lives (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).

Sin and Salvation: We 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.

We 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 possible 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.

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.

The Bible: 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 our worship services.

Our Church Government: Presbyterians hold to a form of government that stresses the active, representational leadership of both ministers and church members. Our government stresses the importance of lay ministry and the equality of men and women in leadership. All church officers in the church are elected through the majority vote of the congregation. All pastors are called to serve in the church through the majority vote of the congregation and the affirmation of the local Presbyterian judicatory called the Presbytery. Elders nominated by each local church, and all ministers are voting members of the Presbytery. Regional decisions regarding the mission of the church is overseen by the Synods located around the country. National decisions regarding the government and mission of the church is determined by the General Assembly. Both Synods and General Assembly consist of commissioners who are elected by the Presbyteries and are made up of equal numbers of ministers and elders.

Our Confessions

The Apostle's Creed: I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth; And in Jesus Christ His only Son our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; He descended into hell; the third day He rose again from the dead; He ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Ghost; the holy catholic Church; the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting. Amen.

Brief Statement of Faith (1991):

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 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 this 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 in 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 as 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.