

## **What do Presbyterians believe?**

This question usually tops the list among folks who want to know more about the Presbyterian Church. Fortunately, the Presbyterian Church is a confessional church. This means that while the Scriptures remain our final authority in matters of faith and practice, we affirm that the church of Jesus Christ has produced powerful, abbreviated statements of faith to guide and instruct the faithful over the past 2,000 years.

Our earliest doctrinal statement, The Apostles' Creed, dates, in part, to the second century. Our most recent confessional statement, A Brief Statement of Faith, was written in the 1980's.

Our Book of Confessions contains nine confessional statements in total. Some of our confessional statements reflect the faith of the entire church of Jesus Christ, while others reflect more the particular understanding of Christianity that is particular to the Reformed family churches, in which tradition the Presbyterian Church stands. Inasmuch as it is our most recent confessional statement, A Brief Statement of Faith will answer basic questions you may have concerning "what Presbyterians believe."

### **A Brief Statement of Faith**

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 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, 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.

### **More about what Presbyterians believe:**

Now at this point, you may or may not feel your question has been satisfactorily answered. To be sure, this Brief Statement of Faith speaks to the basic elements of Christian faith, from a Presbyterian perspective, but what do Presbyterians believe about many additional items not specifically mentioned in the statement? What do Presbyterians believe about abortion, euthanasia, violence in the media, human sexuality, and global economics?

Well, when it comes to most of these issues, the simple truth is that Presbyterians believe many things. We are politically, economically, and theologically diverse. The diversity of the Presbyterian Church is quite remarkable, and it exists not by accident, but by design. There are two reasons for this breadth of conviction, and both are clearly articulated in our denomination's Book of Order.

First, we affirm that Jesus Christ alone is head of the church.

"All power in heaven and earth is given to Jesus Christ by Almighty God, who raised Christ from the dead and set him above all rule and authority, all power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come. God has put all things under the Lordship of Jesus Christ and has made Christ Head of the church, which is his body.

In all things, it is Christ's will that we seek to guide and govern the church. In many cases, the will of Christ is quite clear to us, because we have so much of his teaching faithfully preserved in the

pages of the New Testament. In some cases, however, the Bible can't provide the kind of unequivocal guidance we might want. Faithful Christians, in good conscience, will interpret the Scriptures in different ways. When this happens, the church has a profound choice. It can either be divided or it can be diverse. A divided church is one which polarizes over a 'hot' issue with each side claiming the Scriptures as supporting their side. The two factions will eventually divide, and go their respective ways. A diverse church is one which maintains the Lordship of Jesus over His church, and seeks to maintain open dialogue as both sides communicate their convictions and beliefs, subject to the authority of God's Word.

This brings us to the second reason for our tremendous diversity-the right of private judgment-which is also part of our Book of Order.

"God alone is lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in anything contrary to his Word, or beside it, in matters of faith or worship.

### **What is unique about the Presbyterian Church?**

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 (U.S.A.) 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 scriptures;
- 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 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.