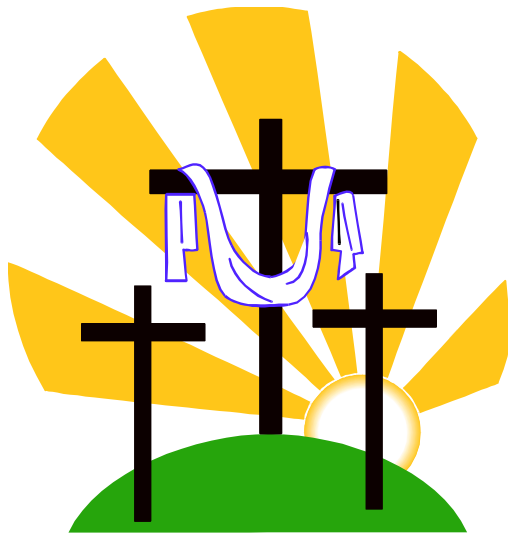


WHO ARE THE PRESBYTERIANS?



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2 Kinds of Presbyterians

There are basically two different kinds of Presbyterians: those who require pastors to believe in the truth of the Bible and those who do not. This is one reason there are so many Presbyterian denominations. Bible-believing groups of Presbyterians split from Presbyterian denominations which had drifted from biblical authority.

Today in the United States, most of the more liberal (less Bible-believing) denominations have joined to form one large denomination. Most of the Bible-believing Presbyterian groups have very good relationships with one another, and a few have joined together. Two of the largest Bible-believing Presbyterian denominations are the Presbyterian Church in America and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

While the different Bible-believing Presbyterian denominations have a great deal to do with each other, they have very little to do with the large, more liberal denomination. In fact, Bible-believing Presbyterians have much stronger relationships with Bible-believing Baptists and Independents than any non-Bible believing church.

1st Mark of Presbyterians

The most distinctive mark of Presbyterians is church government. The word *Presbyterian* is derived from the Greek word *presbuteros*, which means *elder* (1 Peter 5:1). Presbyterian churches are governed by elders.

While there are differences in roles between the elders (more on this later), all elders have the same amount of voting power. Each church body is governed by a board of elders called a session (Titus 1:5). A church also has a board of deacons who do not have ruling authority, but are very active in ministries of mercy and stewardship (Acts 6:3).

The local churches in an area form a presbytery. Elders represent their churches at presbytery. The presbytery is churches working together for ministry to fulfill the Great Commission (evangelism) (Matthew 28:19-20), examine and ordain pastors (1 Timothy 3:1-7), discipline and shepherd pastors and churches (Acts 15:22), and pray for one another.

All the pastors in the denomination, together with elders from each church, meet for a General Assembly once a year. At General Assembly they decide on matters of doctrine and church government, as well as direct the denomination-wide business, such as missions (Acts 15:2).

2 Types of Elders

The Presbyterian Church has two types of elders: teaching and ruling. Teaching elders fulfill the traditional pastoral role of preaching and administering the sacraments. Ruling elders share in the pastoral and teaching work of the church. Together, they shepherd God's flock under their care (1 Peter 5:2) and equip the saints for works of service (Ephesians 4:12).

There are two immediate benefits from the Presbyterian system. First, the pastor is not the sole focus in the church, all elders, together with the deacons, share responsibility. Second, with a board of elders, it becomes much easier to practice biblical church discipline (Matthew 18:15-17). The congregation has delegated authority to discipline to the elders (2 Timothy 4:2) and private matters can be dealt with privately (Galatians 6:1).

2nd Mark of Presbyterians

Presbyterians are confessional. That is, they believe in the usefulness and necessity of written doctrinal standards. One reason standards are important is many people use the Bible to try to prove errors (2 Timothy 4:3), such as denying the Trinity or the full deity of Christ (2 John 7).

Two creeds to which Presbyterians subscribe are the Apostle's Creed and the Nicene Creed. The distinctive doctrinal standard of Presbyterians is the Westminster Confession of Faith. It is a detailed exposition of biblical teaching.

The creeds and confessions of the Church are not above, or even equal to, the Bible. The Bible sits in judgement of any human document (2 Timothy 3:16-17). We do not believe, as the Roman Church does, that the Church makes infallible pronouncements. However, we do believe that the Holy Spirit has been at work in the Church, revealing the truth of God's Word, from the time of the Apostles until now (Acts 2:4). It should not be necessary to

rewrite Christian doctrine in every generation (2 Thessalonians 2:15), though we must remain open to ways the Holy Spirit applies ancient truth to new situations.

3rd Mark of Presbyterians

Presbyterians are covenantal. They read the whole of Scripture as God unfolding his gracious covenant to man (Genesis 17:7). By grace, Christians are part of God's covenant of salvation sealed in the atoning blood of Christ (Matthew 26:28).

The covenant was promised to Abraham when God promised to make him into "a great nation" (Genesis 12:2). While this covenant only included national Israel, it would one day include all nations (Genesis 12:3).

All members of the covenant community received the covenant sign: circumcision. However, only those who received the sign of circumcision with faith were actually justified before God (Galatians 3:8). Salvation was always by faith.

When Jesus came to fulfill all the requirements of the covenant for his people, some Jews did not receive him. Jews who rejected Jesus were not "children of God" (John 1:11-13). In fact, non-believing Jews were "broken off" of the olive tree, which figuratively is Israel, and believing non-Jews were grafted in (Romans 11:17).

This new community is the true Israel (Galatians 6:16). In this new

community, the Lord's Supper replaces Passover and baptism replaces circumcision (Colossians 2:11-12). Households of those who believe, instead of being circumcised, receive the sign of baptism (Acts 16:33). Baptism is a sign and seal of the covenant promise that God will save all who believe in his Son (Acts 2:39).

Therefore, Presbyterians baptize the children of believers not because they believe that baptism saves the child, but as a sign of God's promise. Everyone must receive Christ personally to be saved (John 3:16). Presbyterians baptize their children and then the child must make a public declaration of faith (Romans 10:9), together with a promise to obey Christ in their lives (1 John 1:6), in order for the child to be received at the Lord's Supper (1 Corinthians 11:29).

Many Baptist churches are not all that different. Parents present the child for dedication as an infant, and then the child must profess faith and be baptized to become a full member of the church. With both Baptists and Presbyterians there is a recognition that the child is part of the covenant community and that the child must profess faith to be saved.

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