

*Welcome*

TO A CONGREGATION OF THE

**PRESBYTERIAN**

**CHURCH**

**(U.S.A.)**



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## **TO A CONGREGATION OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (U.S.A.)**

**By Ronn Kerr**

Welcome to this Presbyterian congregation! It is one of the more than 10,000 similar congregations spread across the United States which, together, make up the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

Early Presbyterianism in both Europe and America was often characterized by its insistence on a kind of “doctrinal purity” in which all congregations and all members adhered to identical beliefs and practices. Today, however, Presbyterianism is a uniquely diverse denomination in which it is difficult to characterize either a “typical” congregation or an average Presbyterian.

Our congregations range from large metropolitan congregations of a few thousand members to small country and urban churches of 20 members, from suburban middle-class congregations to inner-city store-front churches. Our worship styles and theological emphases vary from congregation to congregation. We are ethnically and socially diverse and well distributed across the United States.

While this modern diversity sometimes gives us identity problems, it is also a great strength of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Whatever your needs and interests, there is a Presbyterian congregation for you. No matter what our surface differences may be, we are all members of God’s family. We are brothers and sisters who love the same God and our differences genuinely allow us to be more responsive to God’s call. However, around the world, Presbyterians share a common understanding that we are all chosen by God to be disciples of Jesus Christ and this unifying force is much

stronger than the things which make us different from one another.

As a means of further introduction to this congregation of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the remainder of this booklet is divided into a question and answer format focused on the things we think you might like to know about the Christians of this congregation who call themselves Presbyterians.

# OUR HISTORY

## **How did the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) begin?**

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is, uniquely, one of the newest and one of the oldest denominations in America. We are one of the newest because, on June 10, 1983, the two largest Presbyterian groups in the United States reunited after 122 years of separation and became the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). We are one of the oldest denominations because our roots go back to the very first settlers in America. Most historians affirm that nearly three-fourths of all Americans held theological beliefs common to Presbyterians at the time of the Revolutionary War.

Like most branches of Christianity in America, Presbyterians have suffered many divisions and celebrated nearly as many reunions over the years. However, no division has been as painful and lengthy as the division caused by the Civil War. And, no celebration has been as exciting and heartwarming as the feeling of joy and renewal now sweeping the newly reunited Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

At the “reunion” General Assembly in June, 1983, the Presbyterian Church in the United States (the “Southern” church) and the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (the “Northern” church) became the third largest Protestant denomination in America and the largest Presbyterian denomination in the world. In a dramatic ceremony filled with emotional symbolism, the silver crosses of the two former moderators were

fused into a new one for the single moderator of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). In much the same way, the people, congregations, and structures of two long-separated denominations have been reunited into one Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

## **How did Presbyterianism begin**

Actually, the historical movement of which Presbyterianism is a part is more properly called the “Reformed” movement because it is one of the primary branches coming out of the Protestant Reformation. The movement is also called “Calvinism” by some because John Calvin articulated most of the key ideas of Presbyterianism in Geneva, Switzerland in the sixteenth century.

### **JOHN CALVIN**

When John Calvin came into prominence as an important religious leader, the Protestant Reformation was already well established under the leadership of men like Martin Luther of Germany and Huldreich Zwingli of Switzerland.

Calvin was born in Noyon, France in 1509. A bright student, he entered the University of Paris as a young teenager and later studied law, theology, and classical literature at the Universities of Orleans and Bourges. By his early 20’s, he was already established as a classical scholar and author of one book.

In 1533 or 1534, Calvin left the Roman Church to join the Protestant movement. He shared in the writing of an overly Protestant address delivered by the newly elected rector of the University of Paris and had to flee the city in fear of his life. At age 26, in hiding from the French Catholic authorities, Calvin wrote and published a small book entitled *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, a systematic expression of his understanding of Protestant belief. Because of this book, Calvin suddenly became a major leader of the Protestant Reformation in Europe. The *Institutes* was edited, enlarged and republished several times in Calvin’s lifetime and it was eventually translated into hundreds of languages as a primer of the Reformed movement.

Calvin eventually settled in the Protestant city

of Geneva where he became the pastor of the city's largest church, St. Peters. Although his career at Geneva had many ups and downs, he gradually became the established political leader as well as the spiritual leader of one of Europe's most important cities. Under Calvin's leadership and for generations after, Geneva was the acknowledged center of the Reformed movement. It became a haven for Protestant exiles from Catholic countries and the primary training center for Reformed clergy. Many of these Geneva trained clerics, such as John Knox of Scotland, returned to their own countries and stimulated new Reformed movements.

## JOHN KNOX

Even though John Calvin's Geneva was the center of the Reformed movement, American Presbyterians are actually linked to the movement through another man named John, the Scotsman John Knox. History first noticed Knox, a young priest-turned-Protestant, as the bodyguard for George Wishart, a leading Protestant scholar. In 1546, Wishart was arrested, convicted, and burned at the stake for heresy under orders from Cardinal David Beaton. In reaction to this, the growing body of Protestants in eastern Scotland revolted, murdered Cardinal Beaton and barricaded themselves inside St. Andrew's Castle. Inside the castle, John Knox was chosen to be the spiritual leader of the rebellious Protestants. Soon, the Scottish Catholics, aided by French soldiers, battered their way into the castle and the Protestants — including Knox — became slaves on French galley ships.

After a year and a half of slavery, Knox was freed by English Protestants and he became one of the court preachers of Edward VI in England. After Edward's death, Knox joined the flow of Protestant exiles to Geneva where he studied under Calvin, further sharpened his commitment to the Reformed cause, and served as pastor to the English speaking exiles.

When John Knox returned to his beloved Scotland in 1559, the nation was ripe for revolution. The Scottish Church had become decadent. Poverty and misery were everywhere. War after war had depleted the population. And, the govern-

ment was a shaky coalition of feudal leaders under the French Queen Regent, Mary of Guise.

After Knox preached his first sermon at Perth, riots broke out and revolution spread rapidly across the nation. Under Knox's leadership, the revolution was not only rapidly successful, but largely bloodless. By the summer of 1560, all foreign troops were gone, Mary of Guise was dead, power was in the hands of the Scottish parliament, and the Church of Scotland was reshaped along Presbyterian lines. Even though the Reformation was later challenged by Catholic Mary, Queen of Scots, and endangered by both internal and external strife, Scotland had become thoroughly Presbyterian under the almost single handed leadership of John Knox.

## **What impact has Presbyterianism had on America?**

The earliest settlers in the American colonies were primarily Reformed Protestant exiles from England, Scotland, Northern Ireland, and the European Continent. And, many of these were ardent Presbyterians. The largest group of Presbyterians were the Scotch-Irish immigrants who had been "cleared" from Scotland to Northern Ireland by the English and who later migrated to America and settled primarily in the middle colonies including Pennsylvania, Virginia, and the Carolinas. The first Presbyterian churches were formed in America in the late seventeenth century and the first Presbytery was formed about 1706 by Francis Makemie, the "Father of American Presbyterianism."

Makemie landed in Maryland in 1683 as a missionary from Northern Ireland. He immediately began traveling up and down the eastern seaboard establishing new Presbyterian churches, five of which are still in existence. He traveled to Great Britain and brought back new preachers and, around 1706, he formed a handful of Presbyterian clergy into the first American Presbytery. This Presbytery is widely recognized as the first organized denomination in America and the beginning of American Presbyterianism.

Presbyterians were so much a part of the Revolutionary War that some English leaders called

it “the Presbyterian Rebellion!” The Presbyterians’ belief in democracy and freedom put them solidly on the side of the patriots and most historians agree that the Presbyterian understanding of church government strongly influenced the shaping of the *Constitution of the United States*. Indeed, the only clergyman who signed the *Declaration of Independence* was John Witherspoon, the Presbyterian president of Princeton.

In the southern colonies, the young Presbyterian clergyman, Samuel Davies combined solid patriotism with evangelical fervor and preached the cause of independence as well as the love of Christ. Before he died at age 38, he had established several churches, influenced Patrick Henry, formed the first southern Presbytery, and served as a college president.

In 1789, shortly after the formation of the new United States of America, several American Presbyteries and Synods came together for the first General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States. This is the point in time from which today’s Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) dates its existence as a national church.

## OUR BELIEFS

### **How do Presbyterians decide on what they believe?**

We believe that each person is called to work out his or her beliefs based on two primary sources of authority — the Scriptures and the historic creeds and confessions of the church.

**The Scriptures.** From the very earliest times, Presbyterians have held the Bible in high regard. The Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are considered to be, by the Holy Spirit, the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the Church universal. We believe the Bible was written by persons who were inspired by God to record the story of God’s calling and interaction with humankind. The Scriptures contain the remarkable

and mysterious story of God's love and judgment of humankind. It bears witness to the ultimate revelation of God's nature in the person of Jesus Christ, called the Word of God. For Presbyterians, then, the Bible is truly "God's Word."

**Confessions and Creeds.** The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is a "confessional" church. This means that our basic beliefs are embodied in a series of creeds, doctrinal statements, and confessions produced by great councils of the church. In the process of writing confessional statements, Presbyterians have always affirmed that all declarations of belief must reflect the truths found in the Bible. Two of our creeds — the *Apostle's Creed* and the *Nicene Creed* — are also affirmed by most other Christians. However, a few of our most important confessions are authoritative only for other Presbyterian bodies. A few of the most important confessions which we affirm are:

- **The Scots Confession** was written by John Knox and five other Scottish Reformers immediately after the 1560 revolution in Scotland.
- **The Westminster Confession** was written by a congress of Puritan clergymen of the Church of England that met off and on for nine years in the middle of the seventeenth century. Even though it had little impact on England, the *Westminster Confession* has been the most influential of all creeds in Scotland and the United States.
- **The Confession of 1967** was written by a Special Committee of the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. (the northern Presbyterians), modified through a lengthy legislative process, and adopted by the General Assembly as one of the confessions of the church.

These confessions — along with a few others — make up the basic doctrinal heritage of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

Presbyterians have always emphasized education and personal study and every member is encouraged to study the Scriptures, examine our confessions and creeds, and seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit in identifying his or her own beliefs. American Presbyterians have historically emphasized the need for tolerance. While we



believe in the truth of our own doctrines, we affirm persons and denominations with different beliefs as full members of Christ's Body.

## **What beliefs do Presbyterians share with most other Christians?**

Actually, the majority of beliefs held by Christians are the same from one denomination to another. Presbyterian beliefs about God, Grace, Jesus Christ, Justification by Faith, the Holy Spirit, the Priesthood of All Believers, and a variety of other doctrines are very similar to those held by other Protestants.

**God.** The historic *Westminster Confession* states that, "There is but one only living and true God, who is infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit...immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty, most wise, most holy, most free, most absolute...most loving, gracious, merciful, long-suffering, abundant in goodness and truth, forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin....In the unity of the Godhead, there be three persons:...God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost."

God is a reality that is difficult to define. Philosophers have devoted volumes to the task. Others have described the qualities of God as similar to those found in humans. Still others have sought God in nature, in beauty, or in the power and mystery of the universe. Presbyterians believe that God is fully revealed in the person of Jesus Christ, who is simultaneously fully human and fully divine. Therefore, to be a follower of Jesus Christ allows us to experience the saving power of God as well as God's continuing guidance in our lives.

**Grace.** God loves every person and continually seeks to forgive our failure to be obedient. God's constant love and forgiveness is given freely. There is nothing we can do either to deserve or to earn it. This activity of God — God's constant loving and forgiving of every person — is God's grace.

**Christ.** A God of total love and forgiveness is a difficult if not impossible concept for us to understand. Therefore, the great mystery we call God was revealed to us in the form of a man, Jesus of Nazareth. Both the words and the actions of Jesus, as recorded in the Scriptures, help us to better

understand the loving nature of God.

Even Jesus' ultimate act of obedience — giving up his life — was a means of illustrating the extent of God's desire to bring about the reconciliation of all persons. It was God's action aimed at providing the opportunity for every person to come into a right relationship with God. Finally, God raised Christ from the dead and the ultimate power of God was illustrated for all time. Jesus Christ is the Lord of all life, the redeemer of persons, and the head of the church.

**Justification by Faith.** The sense of Chapter XI of the *Westminster Confession* is that “We are justified, or pardoned, not by good works but by faith in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” This means that when we fully have faith that Christ's death opened the way to wholeness and love, we are justified. Justification is being brought into a proper relationship with God and neighbor, fully understanding God's purpose for us, being freed from our obsession with self-interest, released from guilt of our inability to be obedient to God and rescued from our anxiety about meaninglessness and death.

**The Holy Spirit.** God continues to be revealed to us today in many different ways, most of which are identified through experience rather than knowledge. Both the experienced presence of God in our lives and the assumed activity of God in history are identified as the Holy Spirit. The absolute and constant guiding force of God in our lives is a mystery which we identify as the activity of the Holy Spirit.

**The Priesthood of All Believers.** In the Presbyterian service of Holy Communion, the participants usually pass the bread and wine from person to person — a unique symbol of each person serving as a priest (servant) to each other person. We believe that each Christian has direct access to God through worship, prayer, personal confession, and the study of Scripture.

## **What beliefs are uniquely Presbyterian?**

In virtually all of the doctrines held by Presbyterians, there are subtleties which set us apart. Most of these are minor and largely indistin-

guishable in the midst of modern diversity. However, two doctrines — the Sovereignty of God and Predestination — have been most often identified as unique contributions of Reformed theology to the whole of Christian belief. And, most of the other minor differences in Reformed belief flow out of these two pivotal concepts.

**The Sovereignty of God.** The focus of Presbyterian belief is certainly “God-centered.” And, even though this could be said of virtually all Christians, the sovereignty, power, and providence of God are emphasized much more by Presbyterians. For us, God is always one being who relates to us personally in three awe-inspiring ways. God is the Father, the unfathomable creator of all things. God is the Son, the loving redeemer of persons. And, God is the Holy Spirit, the comforter who is active in the world and in persons. The focus of faith for a Presbyterian is the absolute trust that our totally loving God is the absolute ruler and protector of everything. The true purpose of every human being, then, is to love and trust God and to love and protect what God has created.

**Predestination.** Our emphasis on the power and majesty of God has led to the more controversial doctrine of Predestination — the belief that our God of wisdom “predestines” some persons to heaven and, therefore, some to hell. Three things have historically led Presbyterians to this conclusion. First, many persons who come into a relationship with God genuinely sense that they have been “chosen” or “elected” by God because they believe they did nothing whatsoever to merit or earn God’s love. Second, it is obvious that some persons come into a relationship with God very easily while others seem to be unable to hear God’s call. And, finally, the New Testament affirms that God knows in advance who is going to turn to God and who is going to turn away.

“In all things, God works for good with those who love him, those whom he has called according to his purpose. Those whom God has already chosen he also set apart to become like his Son....And so those whom God set apart, he called; and those he called, he put right with himself, and he shared

his glory with them.” *Romans 8.28-30*

The classic understanding of the doctrine of Predestination, even by well-meaning believers, has sometimes led to arrogance and self-righteousness. Some scorned others while believing they were the only chosen ones. Others emphasized God’s action, while relieving themselves of any responsibility. Perhaps it is more appropriate today to understand “predestination and free will” as linked together. The emphasis is on God’s activity of salvation to which believers respond in faith. “God our Savior...wants everyone to be saved and to come to know the truth.” 1 Timothy 2.4. Far from being exclusive and judgmental we respond in humility to the power of God’s love and grace.

## **Which sacraments do Presbyterians recognize?**

We celebrate two sacraments, Baptism and Holy Communion. Baptism is the symbol of our entrance into the communion of believers. It is therefore encouraged that we baptize children as well as adults. The parents and members of the congregation promise to teach and encourage the children in their journey of faith. Later the children confirm the vows taken on their behalf.

Holy Communion is the symbol of God’s continuing presence with the people of God. Around the table, in the spiritual presence of Christ’s body and blood, worshippers are drawn together in remembering what Christ has done and memorializing His sacrifice on our behalf.

## **How and when do Presbyterians Baptize?**

In concert with the mainstream of Christians around the world, we Baptize infants (as well as older youth and adults) and require their parents to take vows to raise their children so that the example of their lives will help lead their children to choose Jesus Christ. The parents and the rest of the congregation pledge to raise the children under the ministry and guidance of the church until they accept the gift of salvation for themselves and

become full and responsible church members.

At around twelve years of age, most Presbyterian children attend a class for several weeks after which they are admitted to active church membership. The young people confirm the vows made by their parents at their Baptism and are initiated into church membership. In short, the Baptism which was begun in faith by their parents is confirmed in faith by the young people when they make their public professions of faith and are commissioned into service as full members of the congregation.

Most Presbyterian Baptisms are by “sprinkling” with the three-part blessing, “in the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

## **How and when do Presbyterians celebrate Holy Communion?**

Presbyterians use three terms interchangeably for the sacrament of Holy Communion: Communion, Lord’s Supper, and Eucharist. The pattern varies all the way from quarterly Communion to weekly Communion in different congregations.

Although Presbyterians encourage variety in the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, the most common pattern is using a stated liturgy which reflects patterns and practices which have been followed with some consistency since the first century. We believe the act of consecrating the bread and juice or wine is to be done by an ordained minister standing behind a table rather than facing an altar. The elements — bread and grape juice — are then distributed by the elders of the congregation and are usually passed from person to person.

We do not believe that Christ’s body and blood are physically present in the elements of Holy Communion but we do affirm that Christ is spiritually present and that the sacrament is one of the means by which God’s grace and love are available to persons of faith. We believe that Christ’s table is open to all persons who are willing to repent of their sins, to live in love and charity with their neighbors, and to follow the commandments of God. We do not restrict the Lord’s Supper only to

members or even only to Presbyterians. Everyone is invited to Christ's table.

## **Do Presbyterians take stands on specific social and justice issues?**

The Presbyterian Church has a long history of concern for social justice and its members and courts have often taken forthright positions on controversial issues involving Christian principles. Early Presbyterians opposed slavery, liquor traffic, gambling, industrial exploitation, war, and the cruel treatment of prisoners. In addition to making pronouncements, Presbyterians have always involved themselves directly in caring for persons and in changing those forces and institutions in society which keep people from fulfilling their potential for full, free, and productive lives.

Today, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) takes affirmative stands on specific moral and social issues and encourages its members to study and to act on issues out of Christian conscience. Both of the most recent confessional statements of the former denominations making up the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) have strong statements with regard to a Presbyterian's responsibility for the elimination of injustice, racism, oppression, war, violence, sexism, poverty, hatred, and the decline of basic moral values. "Christ teaches us to go beyond legal requirements in serving and helping our neighbor, to treat our neighbors' needs as our own, to care passionately for the others' good, to share what we have (PCUS). "God's redeeming work in Jesus Christ embraces the whole of human life: social and cultural, economic and political, scientific and technological, individual and corporate....It is the will of God that his purpose for human life shall be fulfilled under the rule of Christ and all evil be banished from his creation." (UPCUSA).

## **Do Presbyterians cooperate with other Christians?**

Presbyterians have always been leaders in Christian cooperative ventures and ecumenical organizations such as the National Council of

Churches, the Consultation on Church Union, the American Bible Society, the World Council of Churches, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and hundreds of local and regional cooperative organizations. In fact, it is common to find Presbyterians on the staffs of many nondenominational and interdenominational organizations. In the last three decades, Presbyterians have been particularly active in supporting the kinds of ministries in which the mission of Christ is best served through interdenominational efforts.

## **How do Presbyterians feel about education?**

One of the historic traits of Presbyterians around the world has been their emphasis on education. Both Calvin and Knox were responsible for the development of extensive educational systems in Europe and the Presbyterians in the American Colonies were leading pioneers in higher education, public education, and the Sunday School movement. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) maintains stringent education requirements for clergy and encourages church support of education at all levels. In addition, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is historically related to many colleges and universities.

# OUR STRUCTURE

## **What does “Presbyterian” mean?**

We are called Presbyterian because we adhere to a “presbyterian” form of church government in which all authority is placed in the hands of assemblies made up of equal numbers of elders and ministers of the word and sacrament. In our regional and national assemblies, the elected representatives are called “presbyters” from the Greek word “*presbuteros*” which is normally translated “elder” in the Bible. The elected members of the session — which governs our local congregation — are called elders.

Three principles of the Reformed tradition which are important in our understanding of church government are that:

- church structure should be based on Scripture,
- everything should be done in an orderly manner, and
- government should be in the hands of representative assemblies, not individuals.

## **How is the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) governed?**

The denomination is organized in a system of governing bodies composed of presbyters, both elders and ministers of the word and sacrament. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) maintains two offices which are mentioned in the New Testament — presbyters (elders and ministers of the word and sacrament) and deacons — and these offices are open to both men and women.

**The Session** is the governing body of each local or “particular” church. The session is moderated by the minister who serves with elders elected by the congregation. The session is responsible for the mission and government of the particular church.

**The Presbytery** is a corporate expression of the church consisting of all the churches and ministers of the word and sacrament in a geographic area. Presbyteries are considered the primary governing bodies of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). They have the authority to install ministers in particular churches, ordain ministers, organize and dissolve congregations, and discipline both clergy and congregations. Most presbyteries hire some full-time staff for the ongoing work of the church in their geographic area.

**The Synod** is made up of an equal number of elders and ministers of the word and sacrament from the presbyteries in a larger geographic area. Most synods have only limited authority but are organized to encourage and facilitate regional ministries.

**The General Assembly** is the national governing body of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). It meets biennially in even-numbered years and is made up of an equal number of elders and ministers of the word and sacrament elected by the pres-



byteries. The General Assembly oversees the work of the many national agencies of the church, acts on “overtures” or petitions from presbyteries, establishes special task forces and commissions, and proposes constitutional and doctrinal changes which must be ratified by the presbyteries. It elects a new Moderator every other year who serves as chairperson for the duration of the Assembly and as an influential leader throughout the two years. Every four years, the Assembly elects the Stated Clerk, the ongoing ecclesiastical officer of the General Assembly. Through its Council, the General Assembly carries out the mission and vision of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

## **Do you have missionaries and missions?**

Everywhere in the world that Christian missionaries are needed and allowed, Presbyterians are there. Primary emphasis is on serving the needs of people in the under-developed nations of Africa, Asia, and Latin America with food, education, medical care, agriculture, and spiritual aid. This twin emphasis on meeting both spiritual and physical needs has resulted in thousands of native churches, schools, hospitals, community centers, etc. around the world. Today, there are many active Presbyterian denominations around the world, with which the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has ongoing relations through the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the World Council of Churches. Missionary activities are carried out in a spirit of mutuality and partnership with those churches.

In addition to the world mission, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is involved in thousands of mission activities, projects, and institutions in the United States including hospitals, nursing homes, colleges, universities, seminaries, high schools, primary schools, kindergartens, community centers, etc. The same creative diversity which is a primary strength of Presbyterian congregations is also true of our institutions. Diversity, excellence, and commitment to Christ’s mission are the hallmarks of Presbyterian institutions from the smallest local churches to the largest hospitals and universities.