



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 Word of God;
- 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. (*Book of Order*, G-2.0500)

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. (Book of Order, G-10.0102) 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. (*Book of Order*, G-6.0302)

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.

Reformed Tradition in Historical Context

- Children of God
- Children of Abraham (the Jews)
- Christians
- Roman Catholic Christians
- Protestant Christian
- Reformed Christians
- Presbyterians PC (USA)

The Protestant Reformation

- Reforming the Roman Catholic Church
- Martin Luther challenged the abuses of the church system
 - Indulgences—salvation by works
 - Scriptures interpreted only by clergy
- Church authority vs. Scriptural
- Return to Grace alone, Faith alone, Scripture alone

The Reformed Reformation

- Developed by Swiss reformers in the sixteenth century
- Ulrich Zwingli
- John Calvin (Frenchman who made his home in Geneva)
- Became alternative to Lutherans and Anabaptists

Major Beliefs of the Catholic Tradition

- One holy, catholic, and apostolic Church
- Recognition of canonical Scriptures
- Formation and adoption of the ecumenical creeds
- Nicene Creed—personhood of Jesus Christ and the reality of the Holy Spirit
- Apostles' Creed—One God in three persons (Trinity) and God as creator of heaven and earth

Major Beliefs of the Protestant Tradition

- God's grace in Jesus Christ is revealed in Scripture
- Grace alone—God's gift
- Faith alone—not our works
- Scripture alone—no other authority

Five Major Affirmations of the Reformed Faith

1. Election of God's people not only for salvation but also for service
2. Life together marked by disciplined concern for order in the church according to God's Word
3. Faithful stewardship that shuns ostentation and seeks proper use of the gifts of God's creation
4. Recognition of the human tendency to idolatry and tyranny

5. The people of God are called to work for the transformation of society by seeking justice and living in obedience to the Word of God

Six Central Beliefs of the Reformed Tradition

1. The Sovereignty of God
2. The Authority of Scripture
3. The Lordship of Jesus Christ
4. Justification by Faith
5. The Priesthood of All Believers
6. The Fellowship of the Church

Sovereignty of God

- There is no part of life that is separate from God
- Every human being at every moment has to do with the living God
- Human life is rooted in the will and intention of God
- The Glory of God and God's purposes in the world are more important than the salvation of one's own soul

The Authority of Scripture

- The Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament are the only rule of faith and practice
- The Bible is to be interpreted in light of its witness to God's work of reconciliation in Christ (BoC 9.29)

The Lordship of Jesus Christ

- Christ alone is deserving of our allegiance and devotion
- The presence of God in Jesus Christ makes more sense out of life, and gives more meaning to life than any other revelation

Justification by Faith

- We are put right with God by grace through faith alone and not by any thing we are, believe, or do
- Note: the opposite of justification by faith takes two forms: *works righteousness* (where we earn our salvation by being good) and *beliefs righteousness* (where we earn our salvation by believing the right things)—both of which put the responsibility for salvation in humans, not God

The Priesthood of All Believers

- All persons have equal access to God
- No priest (minister) can answer for any human being
- Believers have a right and responsibility to answer for themselves and for their neighbors before God
- There is no qualitative distinction between clergy and lay, sacred and secular, Sunday Christianity and work-week life

The Fellowship of the Church

- You can't be a Christian by yourself; Christianity is corporate as well as personal
- Love of neighbor is the truest test of orthodoxy and doctrine

The Reformed Motto

Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda

- The Church reformed and always reforming
- Or, the Church reformed and always to be reformed

Comparison to Other Traditions

- Governance/Polity
 - Reformed: governance by clergy and elders in representative democracy
 - Episcopalian: hierarchical authority through bishops
 - Congregational : authority vested in individual congregations
- Lord's Supper
 - Reformed: bread and wine are unchanged, but Christ is truly present
- Catholic: bread and wine are transformed into the body and blood of Jesus