

What Is A Presbyterian Church?

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You can't help but notice, at least in Lynchburg, Virginia, the hundreds of churches that dot the landscape. Are there any significant differences between the denominations? What distinguishes, you may be wondering, the Presbyterian Church from others? That's a good question, and one that needs some explanation to be fully appreciated.

At Redeemer we believe that your decision where to be involved in the Body of Christ ought to be based primarily on a church's faithful fulfillment of its Biblical call to teaching, worship, discipleship, mission and mercy. The denominational label should take a back seat to that. You ought to value first the biblical integrity of the church, especially its members' zeal to know the Lord, and to make Him known.

We also acknowledge that people choose churches for all kinds of reasons, some more thoughtful than others. It is not a good reason to attend a certain church simply because your business contacts there are the best. Nor is it a great reason to go to a certain church just because "that's where I've always gone". Nor is it healthy to go to a church merely because it is conveniently located near home, or the service is short, or the building is pretty, or the organ sounds best. Understandably, some parents feel compelled to choose a church based on its excellent children's ministry or youth program. Ideally, a church home best suited to you is the one where all the spiritual needs of your family are met in the most edifying way.

Back to the core issue, what is a Presbyterian church? The best approach is to explore two key questions:

1. How do Presbyterian churches differ from one another?

The answer to this question is, it depends. It depends on:

a. The particular Presbyterian denomination in question.

There are many different Presbyterian denominations. Historically, the two largest were the southern (PCUS) and northern churches (UPC). But there have been some significant splits in the last hundred years, leaving Presbyterian churches of many flavors, with at least five represented in Lynchburg alone. The largest, most media-popular, mainline church is the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (PCUSA). This is the one you most often read about in the newspaper. Redeemer belongs to the Presbyterian in America (PCA), a newer and smaller denomination, totally distinct from the PCUSA. The most helpful way to distinguish between the Presbyterian churches is to examine their:

b. Commitment to the authority of scripture.

This is the issue determining whether the church is conservative, moderate or liberal in its theology. Sadly, the large mainline church has left its historical roots in the Reformation by denying the absolute authority of scripture. While it still formally might hold to the historic creeds of the Reformation, in practice the large liberal church denies the inerrancy of scripture. Our denomination, the Presbyterian Church in America, split off from the mainline church over this very issue in 1973. We determined to follow the Apostles and Reformers in proclaiming the infallible nature of God's written word, believing it to be true in all its parts, being the very inspired word of God.

You should know, however, that there are theological conservatives still in the mainline church, though they are deeply disappointed at the apostasy and liberalism of the denomination as a whole. For good reason, many are simply reluctant to leave, desiring to preserve unity and effect change from within.

A church's commitment to Biblical authority, therefore, may vary depending on:

c. The particular leadership in a given church.

You may have a theological conservative in a liberal denomination. The converse, however, is rare. Virtually all the pastors in conservative denominations are conservative, or they wouldn't want to be there, nor would they be tolerated there. It is the leadership of a church that largely determines its distinctiveness (how it expresses its theological convictions). Individual churches invariably reflect the personalities, inclinations and convictions of their pastors. So, one conservative Presbyterian church may differ in feel quite a bit from another. It depends on the philosophy of ministry of the people driving the ministry, and the vision of the leadership. It is simply hard to judge a book by its cover.

Now we are ready to ask:

2. How do Presbyterian churches (assume conservative, Biblical in practice) differ from other Protestant denominations?

To answer this question we need to delineate four issues, all of which are doctrinal at the core and affect the practice of a church. Churches that are striving to honor God by preaching what the Bible teaches and by conducting themselves Biblically do in fact differ on:

a. Their view of soteriology.

Say what? Yes, a fifty-cent theological term simply meaning one's view of salvation. The debate revolves around man's versus God's initiative in salvation. Who, in the end, actually brought conversion to pass? This question divides earnest Bible-believing Christians into two broad "camps", those classically called "Reformed" or Calvinistic, and those called Arminian. If you have driven by "Free Will Baptist Church" you can be sure that they teach that sinful man possesses the natural ability to choose for God or not to. God can't force Himself on anyone, so they say, and your salvation is ultimately your choice. Then down the street you pass "Sovereign Grace Reformed Church". Guess what? They teach the absolute sovereignty of God in salvation, that we are all dead in sin until God makes us alive by His sovereign choice.

We do need to stress, however, that not all Presbyterian churches believe the Reformed doctrine (theological liberals don't), nor are Presbyterians the only ones who believe in sovereign grace. There are Reformed Baptists, Lutherans and many Bible churches that believe in Calvinism. The Episcopal Church is Reformed, at least formally, because the 39 Articles published in the back of the Book of Common Prayer are essentially Calvinistic.

Another important distinctive is:

b. Their view of Biblical hermeneutics.

Hermeneutics is the science of interpretation. Bible-believing Christians have different ways of understanding how to put the Bible together as a whole. For example, Dispensational and Covenant theologians differ on their view of the covenants, the application of the Law of God, the status of the nation of Israel, the meaning of the church, the time of the Kingdom of God, and the most faithful way to interpret Old Testament prophecy and the promises made to Israel.

As a rule, conservative Presbyterians are covenantal. There are even Baptists that are essentially covenantal, except for their belief that baptism should be applied only to believers. This leads naturally into a third key area of distinction:

c. Their view of the sacraments.

The Reformers broke from the Roman Catholic Church's view that there were seven sacraments in the church, stressing only two, the Lord's Supper and baptism. The initial splits during the Reformation involved differing beliefs about the presence of Christ in Lord's Supper. Following later were churches that formed around the baptistic conviction that only believers should be baptized.

What do Presbyterians teach about the presence of the Lord in the sacrament of communion? One of its fathers, John Calvin of Geneva, held a position that fell midway between the Roman Catholic Church's belief that the elements in the supper were literally the blood and body of Christ (transubstantiation), and Zwingli's (baptistic) view that the supper is merely a memorial with no special significance or grace attached to it. The Reformed view is that Jesus is present spiritually in the sacrament, and that by God's appointing there is a special grace whereby believers who partake in faith are truly nourished spiritually by the life of Christ.

Over baptism, however, a lot more water has been spilled! The Presbyterian view holds with Baptists that adults who believe for the first time should be baptized. We also baptize infants of believers, however, because of our view of the unity of the scriptures, particularly the unity of the covenant of grace. Just as God commanded Abraham to put the sign of the covenant on infants who hadn't yet believed (circumcision), so we too can place the sign and the seal of the covenant on our infant children, as we look in faith for them to embrace Christ one day. Much more could be said about both sacraments. We do need to add that the "paedo-baptism" position (paedo is the Greek word for infant) is not held just in Presbyterian churches, as the Anglican and Lutheran churches practice this as well.

One last distinction is crucial to understanding the difference between Presbyterian and other denominations. It has to do with:

d. Their form of church government.

This may sound like an impersonal way to put things, so we'll simply stress "the way Jesus shepherds His people." Scripture says Jesus, the Shepherd and Bishop of our souls (1 Peter 2:25), appoints "under-shepherds" to care for His flock (1 Peter 5:2-4; Ephesians 4:11; Acts 20: 28). Jesus Himself invests these men with authority to rule for the good government of His people. To submit to Him is to submit to those He has given to be the leaders in His kingdom, which is explicitly distinct from the state. But what does the formal organization of this structure look like?

You remember that Israel was a theocracy. God appointed Elders to judge the people with Moses (Numbers 11). They were set apart with the gifting of the Holy Spirit, and acted as spokesmen for the people (Exodus 3:16; 4:29; 1 Sam. 8:4). In the New Testament era the elders of Israel are still called the elders of the people (Matthew 21:23; 26:3, 47; 27:1). By the time of Acts 11:30 Luke mentions elders; we may conclude that, reading of no special instruction about their role, they functioned in much the same way as did the elders of Israel. Indeed, the Jerusalem council of Acts 15 seems to bear this out, as elders representing the various churches all met in Jerusalem to discuss a doctrinal controversy.

As in the Old Testament, the elder represents the people with authority drawn from God, for the Spirit calls and gifts them for the office (Acts 20:28). Yet it appears that these leaders are chosen by the people (Acts 6:5-6 for deacons; Acts 14:23 for elders). The two kinds of leaders distinguished in the New Testament church are deacons and elders. Deacons (Acts 6:1-8; 1 Timothy 3:8f) are to care for the physical needs of the flock, particularly mercy ministries. Elders come in two varieties, those who rule and those who teach (i.e. pastors: 1 Timothy 5:17). Individual churches were governed by elders (Titus 1:5), and elders from churches in a geographical region made up a presbytery (1 Timothy 4:14; Acts 11:30). Again, it appears that elders from all the churches met to deliberate when necessary (Acts 15).

The PCA, therefore, consists of three levels of spiritual oversight. Particular churches are governed individually by a *session* made up of elders elected by the congregation they serve. The elders of a region form a *presbytery*. All the elders in the denomination gather for the *general assembly*, the annual meeting of the denomination. You see the advantages of this system: it is true to the scriptures; churches are connected together, rather than entities unto themselves (vs. independent or congregational form of government); the power of the church does not lie in the hands of a few at the top (vs. hierarchical or episcopal form of government); and leaders are accountable to their flocks as well as their fellow shepherds.

At Redeemer, to sum up, you will meet two types of church leaders, deacons and elders. Our deacons provide oversight to the church finances, mercy ministry and needs associated with the physical plant. The elders provide oversight to the spiritual needs of the flock, including the teaching, worship and discipleship ministries.