

PRESBYTERIAN 101

Presbyterian 101 | Sacraments | Baptism | Infant Baptism | Lord's Supper

Presbuteros, the Greek word meaning elder, is used 72 times in the New Testament. It provides the name for the Presbyterian family of churches, which is part of the body of Reformed churches of the world. Presbyterians trace their history to the 16th century and the Protestant Reformation. Our heritage and much of what we believe began with the French lawyer John Calvin (1509-1564), whose writings crystallized much of the Reformed thinking that came before him. Calvin did much of his writing from Geneva, Switzerland. From there, the Reformed movement spread to other parts of Europe and the British Isles. Many of the early Presbyterians in America came from England, Scotland and Ireland. The first American Presbytery was organized at Philadelphia in 1706. The first General Assembly was held in the same city in 1789. The first Assembly was convened by the Rev. John Witherspoon, the only minister to sign the Declaration of Independence.

Today's Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) was created by the 1983 reunion of the two main branches of Presbyterians in America, separated since the Civil War: the Presbyterian Church in the U.S. and the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. The latter had been created by the union of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. and the United Presbyterian Church of North America in 1958. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is distinctly a confessional and a connectional church, distinguished by the representation of elders – laymen and laywomen – in its government. 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 pastors and church members.

Sacraments

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has two sacraments, Baptism and Communion.

The Reformed tradition understands Baptism and Communion to be those sacred acts commanded by Christ for the Church to observe. Sacraments are signs of the real presence and power of Christ in the Church, symbols of God's action. Through the Sacraments, God seals believers in redemption, affirms His covenant of grace, renews their identity as the people of God, and marks them for service.

The early Church, following Jesus, took three primary material elements of life – water, bread, and wine – to become basic symbols of offering life to God as Jesus had offered His life. Being washed with the water of Baptism, Christians received new life in Christ and presented their bodies to be living sacrifices to God. Eating bread and drinking wine they received the sustaining presence of Christ, remembered God's covenant promise, and pledged their obedience anew.

Baptism

Baptism is the seal of God's grace and covenant in Christ. Baptism enacts and seals what the Word proclaims: God's redeeming grace offered to all people. Baptism is God's gift of grace and also God's summons to respond to that grace. Baptism calls to repentance, to faithfulness, and to discipleship. Baptism gives the church its identity and commissions the church for ministry to the world.

Baptism is received only once. There are many times in worship, however, when believers acknowledge the grace of God continually at work. As they participate in the celebration of another's baptism, as they experience the sustaining nurture of the Lord's Supper, and as they reaffirm the commitments made at baptism, they confess their ongoing need of God's grace and pledge anew their obedience to God's covenant in Christ.

As there is one body, there is one baptism (Ephesians 4:4-6). The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) recognizes all baptisms with water in the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit administered by other Christian churches.

Infant Baptism

The Bible declares that God claimed humanity as God's own "before the foundation of the world" (Ephesians 1:4). Both believers and their children are included in God's covenant love. Baptism, whether administered to those who profess their faith or to those presented for baptism as children, is one and the same Sacrament. The baptism of children witnesses to the truth that God's love claims people before they are able to respond in faith. Parents bring their baby to church, where they publicly profess their own faith in Jesus Christ and their desire that their child will one day profess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. When an infant or child is baptized the church commits itself to nurture the child in the faith. When adults are baptized they make a public profession of their own faith in Jesus Christ.

The Lord's Supper (Communion)

The Lord's Supper is the sign and seal of eating and drinking in communion with the crucified and risen Lord. During His earthly ministry Jesus shared meals with His followers as a sign of community and acceptance and as an occasion for His own ministry.

The invitation to the Lord's Supper is extended to all who have been baptized, remembering that access to the Table is not a right conferred upon the worthy, but a privilege given to the undeserving who come in faith, repentance, and love. In preparing to receive Christ in this Sacrament, the believer is to confess sin and brokenness, to seek reconciliation with God and neighbor, and to trust in Jesus Christ for cleansing and renewal. Even one who doubts or whose trust is wavering may come to the Table in order to be assured of God's love and grace in Christ Jesus.