

PRESBYTERIANISM

What is Presbyterianism?

Presbyterianism is a branch of the Reformed church that traces its origins to British Puritanism, particularly in Scotland. The name comes from the Greek word *presbyteros*, meaning *elder*, and refers to its form of church government based on elder rule. This distinguishes it from both congregational churches (like many Baptist churches, for example) where decisions are made by the congregation in a bottom-up structure, and episcopal churches (like Anglicans, and Roman Catholics) where decisions flow top-down from higher authorities. In Presbyterian churches, congregations elect elders, including pastors, to rule over them and on their behalf.

What is the PCA?

The Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) is a denomination committed to being "Faithful to the Scriptures, True to the Reformed Faith, and Obedient to the Great Commission." It was founded in 1973 when 250 churches left the Presbyterian Church of the United States (PCUS), a southern Presbyterian denomination, due to its movement into theological liberalism. The PCUS later joined with the United Presbyterian Church in the USA in 1983 to form the PCUSA. Today, the PCA has grown to include over 1900 churches across 88 presbyteries throughout the US, Canada, and other countries.

How is the PCA Governed?

The PCA is governed by a series of graded courts led by Teaching Elders (ministers) and Ruling Elders (laymen) who are elected by their congregations. These courts consist of three levels: Sessions, Presbyteries, and General Assembly.

Sessions govern local congregations. Presbyteries are regional bodies to which churches and ministers relate and are held accountable. We belong to the *Pacific Northwest Presbytery*, comprising 34 churches in Washington, Oregon, Idaho, and Alaska. The General Assembly is the national church to which all churches, Presbyteries, and ministers relate and are held accountable.

This structure provides important accountability and support. For example, if a pastor or Session abuse their authority, the congregation can appeal to their Presbytery for help. Presbytery also helps ensure that ministers are competent and adequately compensated, according to their congregation's means. Similarly, Presbytery decisions can be appealed to the General Assembly.

The General Assembly consists of both Teaching and Ruling elders, with lay elders playing important roles. There are no bishops. The PCA's constitution consists of the Westminster Standards (The Westminster Confession of Faith, the Larger Catechism, and the Shorter Catechism) and the Book of Church Order. All church officers, including deacons, must personally subscribe to these documents and notify their Session (for Ruling Elders and Deacons) or Presbytery (for Teaching Elders) if their theological views change.

What is the PCA's Vision?

The PCA expresses its vision through seven key commitments:

1. We are committed to the Scriptures and the historic Westminster Standards, based firmly on biblical theology that answers the questions and issues of each culture and people we minister to.
2. We are committed to worship that practices God's presence and power within the church to transform surrounding cultures through biblical application in population centers worldwide.
3. We are committed to winning new converts, incorporating them into the church through the ministry of the Word, and providing significant ministry to the needy through deeds of mercy and service.
4. We are committed to the freedom of every member to minister through spiritual gifts while maintaining responsibility to do so under spiritual authority and loving discipline.
5. We are committed to dynamic, prophetic confrontation of non-Christian thought forms and behavior while demonstrating truth through holiness and love in Christian fellowship.
6. We are committed to guarding and strengthening the biblical family while ministering to broken family forms such as the divorced, widowed, and unwed parents.
7. We are committed to teaching and discipling men and women in God's whole counsel while ministering to the whole person's needs.

Where do Presbyterians fall in the church's family tree?

Presbyterians are...

Catholic

The word *catholic* as we are using it here (with a lower-case "c") simply means *universal* not Roman Catholic. Though we have important differences with some churches, we also have considerable agreement with other Christian churches (e.g., on who God is, what it means that Jesus was both God and man, etc.), including the early church.

Evangelical

The Protestant Reformation ("Protestant" comes from Latin *protestari*: to testify, bear witness) established two key tenets that we as evangelical Christians embrace. The first is *Sola Fide* (faith alone)—Luther's doctrine that we are justified or made right with God by faith alone, apart from works. The second is *Sola Scriptura* (Scripture alone)—the doctrine of Scripture's authority.

Reformed

The following sections will describe some of the distinctives of Reformed doctrine. Historically, Reformed theology—and Presbyterianism—emerged from the Protestant reformation alongside Lutheranism and Anglicanism, as a response to errors and corruption in the Roman Catholic church.

The terms "Reformed" and "Presbyterian" are essentially interchangeable, with "Reformed" referring to a system of doctrine and "Presbyterian" referring to the form of church government. Reformed churches trace their roots to continental Europe, while Presbyterians go back to the British Isles, but both churches share very similar doctrine and governance.

It's important to understand that Reformed theology wasn't "invented" in the sixteenth century. Rather, it represented both a retrieval and development of historical (and biblical) Christian doctrine. It is also crucial to note that the distinctives of the Reformed faith are not the whole of the Reformed faith.

What Do Presbyterians Believe?

Our beliefs are summarized in the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms. While these are a helpful summary, our ultimate authority is Scripture. As WCF 1.10 states: "The supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private illuminations are to be examined, and on whose decisions we are to rely, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in Scripture."

Sovereignty of God

We believe God freely governs all creation, creatures, and their actions. Everything that happens occurs according to His decree and for His purposes. God is never surprised but uses all things

for His people's good and His glory. He overrules wicked men and brings their actions to nothing, working all things according to His will (Romans 8:28).

This doesn't mean humans lack free will, as WCF 3.1 explains:

God, from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass: yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures; nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established."

Doctrines of Grace

Reformed Christians do not forget the sovereignty of God when they come to other doctrines. For example, God is sovereign even over the salvation of all men. We describe this in five key doctrines which we call "the Doctrines of Grace". These are not necessarily unique to the Reformed faith, but they are a defining element of it. They include:

1. Unconditional Election¹

God chooses people according to His good pleasure, not based on any merit of their works or foreseen faith or repentance.

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will..."

—Ephesians 1:3-5

2. Effectual Atonement²

Christ's death was intended to secure salvation for particular individuals.

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd." This teaching is compatible with believing that Christ's death was sufficient for all and that the gospel's promise may be offered to all.

—John 10:11-16

¹ Matthew 11:26; John 6:37; Acts 13:48; Romans 8:28-29; 9:6-26; Ephesians 1:3-5; 2 Thessalonians 2:13

² John 10:11-16, 26; Ephesians 5:25; Acts 20:28

3. Total Inability (or Total Depravity)³

All people, being sinners, cannot turn to Christ for salvation on their own.

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved...

—Ephesians 2:1-5

4. Effectual Grace⁴

The specific grace that converts sinners is effectual (or “irresistible”).

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”

—Ephesians 2:8-10

5. Perseverance of the Saints⁵

Believers must maintain their faith until the end, and they will certainly persevere because of God's gracious election.

...you do not believe because you are not among my sheep. My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand.

—John 10:26-29

A Covenantal Understanding of the Scriptures

God's gracious, covenant relationship with His people forms the Bible's central theme. This is expressed throughout Scripture in the covenant statement: "I will be their God and they will be my people".⁶

God both initiates the covenant and establishes its terms, including blessings for obedience and consequences for disobedience. Both blessings and consequences serve as God's instruments to draw His people toward the ultimate blessing—fellowship with Him.

³ Genesis 6:5; Jeremiah 17:9; Isaiah 64:6; Romans 3:10-18; Ephesians 2:1-10

⁴ John 6:7, 44; 10:16; Romans 8:28-30; 1 Peter 1:3-5; Acts 13:48

⁵ 1 Peter 1:3-5; Romans 8:38-39; John 6:39; 10:28-29

⁶ Genesis 17:7; Exodus 6:6-7; 19:4-6; Leviticus 11:45; 2 Kings 11:17; Ezekiel 34:24; 2 Cor. 6:16; Hebrews 8:10

Covenant theology recognizes strong continuity between the Old and New Testaments. These aren't separate documents for different groups of God's people. Rather, all people—Jews and Gentiles, Old Testament and New Testament saints—are saved through faith in Christ.

And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.

—John 10:16

Sacraments

Christ established two sacraments for the Christian church: baptism and the Lord's Supper. These sacraments are visible signs of invisible, spiritual realities. God gave us these sacraments as means of grace—when we participate in them by faith, He promises to give us the spiritual grace they signify. Our response should be obedience to Christ's commands to be baptized and take the Supper, along with gratitude for the grace shown and offered through them.

Baptism

Water baptism, whether by sprinkling, pouring, or immersion, symbolizes the washing away of sin⁷ and inclusion in God's covenant people.⁸ We view baptism less as our declaration to follow Christ and more as God's declaration that He will be our God, and we will be His people.

Since the New Testament church is founded on God's covenant with Abraham⁹, we believe the covenant promise of salvation has always included believers and their children.¹⁰ In the Old Testament, God established circumcision for males eight days old. While this didn't guarantee salvation, it included them in the promises, privileges, and obligations of God's covenant people—similar to how a wedding ring signifies the real promises and obligations of marriage without guaranteeing faithful execution of those marital duties.

Circumcision was a covenant sign pointing to Christ¹¹ and was applied to entire households,¹² including infants.¹³ Similarly, baptism points to Christ¹⁴, and the pattern of household baptism continues in the New Testament¹⁵. The New Testament never excludes children from the covenant of grace. Instead, Christ says of them, "to such belongs the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 19.14).

⁷ Mark 1.4; Acts 2.38

⁸ Romans 6.3-4; Galatians 3.27

⁹ Romans 4.11

¹⁰ Genesis 17.7-14; Acts 2.39; 1 Corinthians 7.14

¹¹ Colossians 2.11

¹² Genesis 17.10

¹³ Genesis 17.12

¹⁴ Colossians 2.12

¹⁵ Acts 16.33

The Lord's Supper

In the Lord's Supper, bread and wine represent Christ's body and blood given for us on the cross. This meal helps us remember and proclaim Christ's sacrifice, look forward to His return and the marriage feast of the Lamb, and experience His present comfort and strength through His Spirit. The Supper is also a fellowship meal with not only Christ but also his body—our brothers and sisters with whom we gather around the Table.

As a covenant meal for God's people, only baptized believers may participate. For children, parents and elders determine when a child has trusted Christ and understands the meal's significance.

The Lord's Day

Presbyterian teaching generally holds that the requirement to observe the Sabbath (seventh day) isn't binding on Christians, as it was part of the Old Testament ceremonial law. Nevertheless, the duty to keep one day in seven holy remains a part of the moral law. Following New Testament patterns, we observe this on the first day of the week—the day of Christ's resurrection, or the Lord's Day.¹⁶

The purpose of keeping the Lord's Day holy is to free ourselves and others from life's lesser duties and joys so we can focus on our primary and eternal purpose—to know and enjoy God.¹⁷

¹⁶ Acts 20.7; 1 Corinthians 16.1-2; Revelation 1.10

¹⁷ Cf. Westminster Shorter Catechism, Question 1