

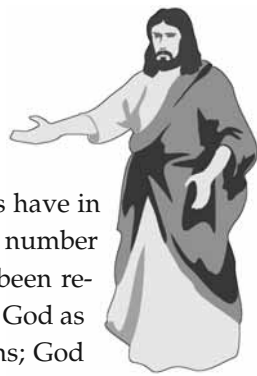


# What Do Presbyterians Believe?

## SESSION 2

| *What does “Presbyterian” mean? Who are Presbyterians and what do they believe?*

### What Do Presbyterians Believe?



We have seen that Presbyterians have in common with other Christians a number of theological beliefs: God has been revealed in Scripture; we worship God as Trinity, one God in three persons; God has created the world and is continually involved in it; God has created humans to live in relationship with God, but we have turned away from God to follow our own ways and are sinful people.

Among important particular Presbyterian emphases have been that we recognize the authority of the Scriptures for our lives by the work of the Holy Spirit; that God is a covenant God who enters into relationships with people; that God guides our lives and human history through God’s providence; and that sinful humans cannot establish a relationship with God on our own, but we need God’s love and power to become the people God intends.

The good news of the Christian gospel and the message Presbyterians proclaim is that the triune, creator, covenant God who is revealed in Scripture has reached out to draw sinful humans into the relationship and the lives God intends. God has done so in Jesus Christ. The actions of God in sending Jesus Christ into the world provide salvation for those who believe in Christ by faith.

Here we will describe what Presbyterians believe about these important realities.

### Jesus Christ

Presbyterians believe the story of the Bible is the story of God reaching out to the creation in love—a love that is fully and perfectly expressed in Jesus Christ. The message of the Scriptures is summarized in John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

Presbyterians believe Jesus Christ is the eternal son of God, the “Word” of God who was “with God” and “was God” (John 1:1). At the same time, we believe “the Word became flesh and lived among us” (John 1:14). These two verses became more fully expressed in the theological controversies of the early church where the church affirmed that Jesus Christ is “fully human, fully God” (*Book of Confessions* 10.2). Theologically, this is called the incarnation. God has become a human being in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is Emmanuel—“God with us.” The Christian church proclaims both Jesus’ humanity and his divinity. He is the second person of the Trinity, who has come to earth and “died for us” while “we still were sinners” as an expression of God’s love (Rom. 5:8).

With other Christians, Presbyterians believe the death of Jesus Christ brings salvation. God and humanity are brought together; sin is forgiven; guilt is gone; and a whole new way of living is opened up for humanity. There are many biblical images to describe this: forgiveness, reconciliation, expiation, liberation, redemption, justification.

These describe different aspects of the central message of the gospel: the power of sin over human life is broken; a new relationship of love with God through Jesus Christ is now possible. This is the good news!

Jesus' death on the cross brings God and humanity together in the relationship intended in creation. Theologically, this is called the atonement. God and humanity "at-one." This sets our relationship with God on a new basis. We are no longer turned in upon ourselves. Now we are freed to live lives of love, justice, peace, and service because Jesus Christ has died to defeat the power of sin in our lives and, ultimately, in the life of the world. In the cross of Christ, God's love for us is shown in that God has done for us what we can never do for ourselves: reached out to save us, to bring us salvation.

The death of Christ is made effective for us by the resurrection of Jesus Christ. If Christ had died and stayed dead, his death would have no power beyond that of an important example. His death would not have had the power to save us or bring us a new life of forgiveness and reconciliation. The cross is Christianity's central symbol. But Presbyterians stress that the cross is now an empty cross. Jesus Christ is risen! The resurrection of Christ vindicates the life Jesus lived, conveying God's love in action. The resurrection vindicates the death Christ died by showing God's persistent love in raising Christ from the dead (1 Cor. 15:4). Death is not the last word, but through the power of God, Christ is alive, and his death now has the power to bring the reconciliation God intends. Christ's resurrection means that for God's people the power of sin is broken, that we need not fear death, and that the "eternal life" Jesus Christ proclaimed (John 10:28; 11:25) and the reign of God he embodied where sin and evil are defeated (Mark 1:14–15) are now realities.

## The Holy Spirit

Salvation comes to us in Jesus Christ through the work of Jesus Christ by the work of the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit is the third person of the Trinity, the one who applies what God has done. The Spirit illumines us, opens our eyes to see Scripture as the Word of God and to enable us to confess Jesus Christ as God's Son, our Lord and Savior. The Spirit gives us the gift of faith.

Faith is the means God uses to make the connection between what God has done and we humans, for whom God has acted. We perceive who Jesus Christ is by the gift of faith. Presbyterians believe the power of sin is so pervasive and all encompassing that our hearts and minds are turned away from God and from all desire to have a relationship with God. By the work of the Holy Spirit, the gift of faith is given so we see reality in a whole new way. Our hearts, minds, and wills are made new!

Theologians call this the witness of the Holy Spirit. Presbyterians have always stressed that we come to faith in Christ as Lord and Savior by God's divine work, through the Holy Spirit, and not by our own powers of reason or intuition or experience. God has provided salvation as a free gift in Jesus Christ. We recognize, receive, and believe in this gift by the work of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit enables us to look at creation and perceive it as God's work. As the psalmist declared, "The heavens are telling the glory of God" (Ps. 19:1). When we know the reality of God, by faith, we can see nature around us as the glorious work of God. We receive faith by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit makes the work of Christ real and effective in our lives, giving us a new birth or "being born from above" (John 3:3). The Spirit overcomes the power of sin in our lives and makes us new people. We call this regeneration—our whole lives made new by the work of the Spirit in giving us the gift of faith. Through faith we perceive the realities of what God has done in Christ. As Paul put it, "No one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor. 12:3).

## Salvation by Grace

God's work in providing salvation in Jesus Christ is a work of God's grace. "Grace" means God's unmerited favor. When we receive the grace of God, we are receiving that which we can never deserve or merit on our own. It is a free gift. Ephesians puts it clearly: "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast" (Eph. 2:8–9). The salvation we receive in Jesus Christ is provided by God; our reception of salvation comes by the work of the Holy Spirit, who gives us the gift of faith. We are the recipients of the work of the triune God, and we receive the benefits of salvation by the work of God.

## Election and Predestination

Presbyterians are known for believing in predestination or election. There are many caricatures of this doctrine. Some think it means Presbyterians see themselves as the “elite” or “chosen” of God and so we do not care about other Christians—just ourselves. Or, there is the view that if you believe in predestination, you will not care about evangelism or spreading the gospel, and that election leads to indifference in the Christian life—doing whatever one pleases because one is “automatically” saved.

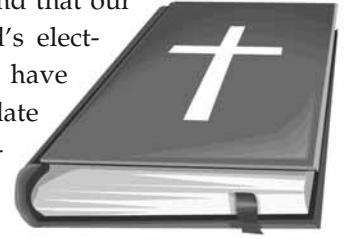
Instead, Presbyterians affirm a belief in predestination or election because we believe it is biblical and because we believe it brings glory to God and affirms God’s greatness and sovereignty in all things.

“Predestination” and “election” are often used synonymously. They refer to God’s work in salvation. If we are all sinners (Rom. 3:23) and enslaved to the power of sin (Rom. 6:17) and are “dead through the trespasses and sins” (Eph. 2:1), then we do need a savior. The gospel message is that God has sent Jesus Christ into the world to provide salvation—so we can become a “new creation”—people who are reconciled with God in Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 5:16–17), by the work of the Holy Spirit. “All this,” said Paul, “is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ” (2 Cor. 5:18). In other words, God has done for us what we could not do for ourselves. God has reached out to save us and make us new people in Jesus Christ.

Election and predestination are proclamations that our salvation belongs to God’s work, that God has taken initiative, and that the work of salvation is God’s work in us. They are another way of saying salvation is by God’s grace. It is not by our own powers or works that we are saved; it is by God’s unmerited favor, God providing the gift of faith by the work of the Holy Spirit. Presbyterians believe Scripture affirms that God predestines persons to salvation (Rom. 8:29–30) and refers to these as the “elect” of God (Mark 13:27; Rom. 8:33; 2 Tim. 2:10). It is God who “chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love” (Eph. 1:4).

Election and predestination are great comforts to us. They remind us that it is God’s power that saves us and not our own feebleness or our imagined powers. Assurance of salvation rests in the God who has given us

salvation in Christ. We do not worry or speculate about our salvation. We need simply ask, “Do I believe in Jesus Christ?” If we do, we recognize that we do so by the power of the Holy Spirit and that our salvation is secure in God’s electing purposes. We do not have to—nor should we!—speculate about whether or not others are elect. Our mission is to proclaim the gospel to all persons and trust God’s



electing purposes in Christ, by the Holy Spirit, to draw people to faith. Election and predestination give us great freedom to be secure in Christ and to live lives of grateful obedience for the “good news of great joy for all the people,” of which the angels sang when Jesus Christ was born (Luke 2:10).

## Church

Theologically, the church is the people of God (Col. 3:12; Titus 1:1; 1 Peter 1:2). The people of Israel in the Old Testament, with whom God entered into covenants, and the church of God in the New Testament—those who believe in Jesus Christ—are people who have been chosen by God to do God’s work in this world. The church is God’s covenant people who by faith are united with one another in Jesus Christ. Because we believe in Christ, we seek to serve God as Christ’s disciples in the world. It is God’s initiative that establishes the church. It is God who “calls,” who grants the gift of faith, and who by the Holy Spirit is with the church to guide, empower, and equip the church to carry out mission and ministry in the world. As the Confession of 1967 puts it: “To be reconciled to God is to be sent into the world as [God’s] reconciling community” (*Book of Confessions* 9.31).

Presbyterians believe in the “visible church,” which is the body of believers we see around us, attending worships and aligning themselves in some ways with the church. All those who confess faith in Christ—without regard to race, gender, social or economic location—are members of the visible church. The church is the place from which ministries in the name of Jesus Christ begin. The church is entrusted with the message of reconciliation in Christ and serves Christ by spreading the good news of the gospel, working for peace, seeking justice, bringing healing, and committing itself to carrying out God’s purposes in the world—even in the midst of difficult social, cultural,

or political situations. The visible church is a witness to Jesus Christ (Acts 1:8).

We also believe in the “invisible church,” which is the church known only to God and is all those who have genuine faith in Jesus Christ. Sometimes people unite with a church but then fall away and do not exercise their faith any further. Some may make a profession of faith that is not genuine or sincere. They may be part of the visible church but not of the invisible church in that they do not truly love Jesus Christ. Ultimately, the invisible church is the elect of God through all ages, what is called in the Apostles’ Creed the “communion of saints.” It is not left to us to determine who is genuinely Christian or whose faith profession is real and true. The doors of church membership must always be open to all who confess their faith in Jesus Christ. The reality of their profession is known only to God. So it is not our job to judge. But Presbyterians have a comprehensive view of the church, looking to those who have gone before us, to those who are the church in the present day, and to those who will come after us as the “church of God.”

## Sacraments

Presbyterians believe in two sacraments in the church: baptism and the Lord’s Supper. These are received in the midst of the church’s worship, where the people of God are gathered to give praise and glory to God and to celebrate what God has done. Sacraments are gifts God gives to strengthen and nourish our faith. They are outward or visible signs of a reality that is invisible.

Baptism is a sign of God’s covenant in which God welcomes new believers into the household of faith, the church. Infant baptism is an important part of Presbyterian theology in that we see children of believers being brought into the church as part of the covenant community. The parents of the infant act on behalf of the child in professing faith, while the worshiping congregation promises to nourish and encourage Christian faith on behalf of the child. When the child matures, a personal profession of faith in Christ, reaffirming the vows made by others in baptism, can occur.

The Lord’s Supper is God’s gracious action in Christ to nourish our faith. When we eat the bread and drink the cup, we receive the benefits of Christ’s death for us. Our faith is strengthened by Christ’s presence with us in the Supper, conveying the blessings of the gospel and assuring us of his presence with us in all of life and of the ultimate reign or kingdom of God (1 Cor. 11:23–26).

## Future Life

The Bible is the story of salvation. The big picture of the Bible is that the covenant God is at work in history among all peoples and all cultures to establish the reign, or the kingdom, of God. The ultimate reign of God is marked by knowledge of God, obedience to God, God’s just rule, and peace (Hebrew *shalom*) among nations. God’s reign is taking shape in the world, even as Jesus proclaimed (Mark 1:15). It is imperceptible now, but its success is assured (Matt. 13:31–33). We do get glimpses, however. As Jesus told us in his parables, the reign of God is taking shape from small, seemingly insignificant beginnings. God is at work for the divine purposes in the midst of history. In a sense, the kingdom has “already come” in the person of Jesus himself, who in his life, death, and resurrection established God’s reign in the world. But the kingdom is also “not yet.” We live, anticipating the ultimate fulfillment of the reign of God and the day when “every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord” (Phil. 2:11).

Other biblical dimensions of the future life—the second coming of Jesus Christ, the Last Judgment, the final states—are elements that will also be revealed in the future. But Presbyterians emphasize that the future is secure in God’s hands, that we can trust God’s ultimate reign to emerge, and that “with believers in every time and place, we rejoice that nothing in life or in death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (*Book of Confessions* 10.5)!

## About the Writer

*Donald K. McKim is academic and reference editor for Westminster John Knox Press. He is the author and editor of a number of books about Reformed theology and beliefs.*