

The Presbyterian Church in America

A MANUAL FOR NEW MEMBERS

CHAPTER TWO
WHAT PRESBYTERIANS BELIEVE

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It is frequently pointed out that the word “Presbyterian” refers to the Eldership and that Presbyterianism, as such, is a form of church government. But Presbyterianism is not only a form of government in the Church. It is also a well-defined system of beliefs or of doctrine. In the exaltation and interpretation of the Bible, the Reformation reached its zenith in the teachings and writings of John Calvin. Thus Presbyterianism, following his interpretation of the Bible, is known as Calvinism. More specifically, the Calvinism of Presbyterians is based on the *Westminster Confession of Faith* and the *Larger and Shorter Catechisms*, documents which were written nearly a hundred years after Calvin died. Presbyterians share with other evangelical churches many basic beliefs. Presbyterians also recognize that earnest Christians may follow other interpretations of the Bible in non-essential matters. But Presbyterians believe that in the Reformed system (another word for Calvinism) the teachings of the Bible are most fully and most accurately set forth.

Every Presbyterian officer and minister takes a vow that he believes the Reformed faith to be that system of doctrine which the Bible teaches. Every Presbyterian officer and minister in the more conservative Presbyterian churches, moreover, also vows that he will take steps to remove himself from his position should he ever find that his beliefs have taken another direction. Now the strength of Presbyterianism lies in its central loyalty to the Scriptures. These churches have always insisted that only in the Bible may we find what we must believe about God, His works and His ways. Only the Bible is a rule of faith and life free from error--*our infallible rule of faith and*

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practice. We believe that Presbyterianism agrees with what the Scriptures teach and that it contains nothing contrary to what the Scriptures teach.

SOVEREIGNTY

As a system of doctrine, all Presbyterian beliefs are determined by a basic thought about God: that He is sovereign in all things. The doctrine of the sovereignty of God teaches that God governs His creation, His creatures and all their actions. If loyalty to the Bible is the great strength of Presbyterianism, its belief in the sovereignty of God is its very life. By this doctrine, Presbyterians mean to say that who God is provides the key to human experience, not what man does. And what God works provides the key to salvation, not what man works. When we think of faith, we think first of God. When we think of the effects of faith we think first of God. Even when we think of the ordinary events in the lives of every man we think first of God. Presbyterians believe that everything which happens takes place according to the will of God and can be fully understood only in the will of God. Nothing can come to any man that He does not allow for His own purposes and glory. He overrules the actions of evil men and brings their evil to naught. He works all things after the counsel of His own will and turns all things, even apparent evil, to ultimate good in the lives of those who love Him, who are the called according to His purpose. Man's reason for living is to glorify God by doing His will and to enjoy Him forever in the practice of life's highest privilege which is to serve the sovereign God who created him and gives him breath.

TOTAL DEPRAVITY

Presbyterians believe that as the result of Adam's sin all men are sinners; that sin is a stain upon us from our birth so that if left to the natural inclinations of our wills our lives would inevitably turn to evil. In the view of Presbyterians human nature is not neutral: it is not free to move upward or downward depending on circumstance, environment or education. Neither is

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human nature good--capable of infinite development in goodness, needing only to be left alone or "brought out" to achieve perfection. Human nature is rather sinful and "inclined to evil as the sparks fly upward." We see undesirable behavior and sinful tendencies in the smallest infant and we observe that without discipline and restraint human beings inevitably live selfishly. This view of human nature Presbyterians describe by the term "original sin" because human imperfection seems to be both innate and instinctive. This imperfection (sin) taints every facet of our personalities. Consequently the description of original sin to which Presbyterians subscribe is summarized in the doctrine of "Total Depravity." Mankind, we say, is inevitably (originally) and altogether (totally) marked by sin on account of the Fall. The doctrine of "Total Depravity" also suggests man's helplessness. Human beings are not only sinful, they are also helplessly sinful. We are spiritually dead in our sins, bound under the guilt and penalty of sin and unable to do anything to please God. None of our works are pure and therefore pleasing to God. All our righteousness is as filthy rags. We do not even have it in us to turn to Him that we may be cleansed and healed.

SALVATION

Presbyterians believe that God so loved us—while we were dead in trespasses and sins—that He sent forth His only begotten Son to redeem us. The Lord Jesus Christ, pre-existent with the Father, by Whom He created the worlds, came to earth by being born of the virgin Mary. He, the Eternal Son, took upon Himself our nature, lived a sinless life as a man and died on the cross in a sacrifice which somehow paid the price of our redemption from sin—we know not how but we believe it. In a victory over death and the grave our Lord rose from the dead and returned to the Father from Whom He sent the Holy Spirit to apply to those who would believe the effects of His work. In the gift of the Holy Spirit—by grace through faith—the originally sinful nature of man is transfigured to become godly and possessed of the capacity to be God-like. This "new life" begins now in the hearts of those who have

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been justified by grace through faith and received the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ. It continues into and through eternity.

ELECTION

In keeping with the doctrine of sovereignty, under which God is seen to determine all things, Presbyterians believe that the knowledge of Christ and the acceptance of Christ which belong to salvation also come from God. We are saved by faith alone and this faith itself is a gift of God. Our personal redemption is not due to any goodness of our own for we have none; neither is it earned by our good works, for sinners cannot accumulate "credit" leading to redemption. We find Christ because He finds us. We love Him because He first loved us. We become His because He chooses us, calling us and sanctifying us after He justifies us. Presbyterians do not pretend to understand the great truth underlying the election of God. They simply know that they did not seek God until He enlightened their hearts; they did not believe until He gave them faith; they did not come until they felt themselves moved. The mysteries of His will we cannot fathom, but we know that had it not been for Him we would not be where we are. Because salvation is clearly not given to every man (although we know not why) Presbyterians therefore believe in reprobation, or the eternally lost condition of those not elect. The doctrine of election is dear to Presbyterians because, on the one hand, it pays homage to the sovereignty of God in all human affairs and, on the other, because it gives a certainty and an assurance to those whose trust in the Lord Jesus Christ that no dependence on themselves can give. The effect of such a faith is the assurance that all things work together for good to them who "...are the called according to His purpose," that nothing in this life or in the life to come can separate them from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus. This assurance means, to the believer, that he can go forward boldly into whatever path he feels led because he knows that it is God who goes before. It further means that he is eternally secure in the love of God because he has

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been sealed-not of himself-by the Holy Spirit until the final day of fulfillment.

SANCTIFICATION

Presbyterians believe that as the election of God calls men to redemption in Jesus Christ so it calls them to newness of life in Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit not only makes a child of sin to become a child of God, He also leads the new believer into anew way of life which is in conformity to the will of God; into holiness of life in sanctification. We believe that every Christian will show forth in his life the fruits of a living faith; that he will grow in spiritual maturity and in patterns of living which will increasingly conform to the will of God for him. We believe that love, joy, peace and all the other characteristics of godliness will necessarily become evident in this life as the Holy Spirit increasingly takes charge; that he will more and more "live unto righteousness" as he moves towards the "measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ." As love of God increases within him, love for his Christian brothers and for his human neighbors everywhere will correspondingly increase. To this end, Presbyterians believe in the necessity for utilizing the "means of grace," prayer, worship and, most especially, the study of God's Word.

THE CHURCH

Presbyterians believe in the holy, catholic Church; that is, in the universal unity of Christ's body in time and eternity. As a vine and its branches comprise a single whole, so Christ and all those in whatever place or age derive their life from Him comprise a single body, the Church universal. This Church is not to be identified with any denomination or body on earth for it exists wherever a true child of God may be found. We believe that there are Presbyterians who belong to this Church and there are Presbyterians who do not; there are Baptist, Methodists and Roman Catholics who belong to this Church and there are Baptists, Methodists and Roman Catholics who do not.

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Because Presbyterians believe in the holy, catholic Church, they also believe in the Communion of Saints: the corporate practices of the Christian life. Christian living is not a solitary thing. We believe it to be the Lord's will that Christians congregate in churches for worship, for service, for growth in grace and mutual edification. The Church universal is related in those corporate manifestations of Christ's body in which the ministry of the Word, the administration of the sacraments, the exercise of government and discipline according to the New Testament pattern establish and enlarge the household of faith.

THE SACRAMENTS

Presbyterians believe in two sacraments, baptism and the Lord's Supper. We believe that they are genuine sacraments, that is instituted by Christ Himself; visible signs which actually confer the blessing or grace of God when appropriated in faith. We do not believe that the blessing is inherently present in the sacraments, but that they are rather the signs and seals of the blessings they represent. As the Holy Spirit does not dwell in the pages of a Book, and yet He warms our hearts by means of the message of that Book, so grace does not reside intrinsically in the sacraments, but comes to the believer who receives them in faith.

Baptism is a sacrament which signifies and seals God's covenant promise to be a Father to His own and to their children. It visibly represents the way this promise is carried out in the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the life of those in whom the promise is fulfilled. It is a sacrament which belongs to any in whom there is reason to assume that the promise is being fulfilled, that is, on any professing their faith or setting up a household of faith. We believe that baptism belongs to the children of believers when a household of faith is setup and the conditions of prayer and worship are met. These bring evidence of the Holy Spirit's presence in the hearts of the children as well as in the hearts of their believing parents. Because we have visible as well as historical evidence that in a Christian home children may grow in the true nurture and

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admonition of the Lord, we believe that the covenant sign and seal of the Lord's presence (baptism) belongs to such children.

The Lord's Supper not only shows forth the Lord's death until He shall return, but is a sacrament in which He is truly though spiritually present and truly though spiritually received. Again, as the Word conveys grace by providing the occasion for the Holy Spirit to speak to the human heart, so the Lord's Supper conveys the benefits of the death and resurrection of Christ to believers who approach the Table in faith. Presbyterians believe that the Supper is not the possession of any person, congregation or church. It is the Lord's Supper. It is not the table of any sect or denomination. It is the Lord's table. We do not minister about the table as hosts, but as guests of Him who issues the invitation to come and who distributes His benefits severally as He will. Consequently we do not believe that we can dispense or withhold the gift of grace; that we can bar any believing baptized Christian whom He would feed. For such reasons we practice "open" communion. At the same time we expect those who partake to be members in good standing in an evangelical church.

THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE EVERLASTING

Presbyterians believe in the return of Jesus Christ "to judge men and angels at the end of the world." Until He comes, we believe that the souls of those who die in Him depart to be with Him "where they behold the face of God in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies." At the last day, we believe that the dead shall be resurrected and the living shall be changed. Christ's elect "unto honor...and everlasting life," but the reprobates "unto dishonor... and punishment with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power."

Dr. Taylor, editor of the Presbyterian Journal from 1959 until 1983, served as president of Biblical Theological Seminary in Hatfield, Pa., until his death in 1984.