

What Are Presbyterians and What Do They Believe?

Great question and I'm so glad you asked! We're Christians so we can start off with that. Presbyterians believe in the life, death, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Like all other bible-believing, spirit-filled Christians we believe things like John 3:16 *"for God so loved the world that he gives one and only Son that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life."* So if you ask me what a Presbyterian believes first of all we would say this- we believe the gospel.

We are also bible-believing Christians. We have a very high view of the inspiration of the holy Bible. So, we believe in the inspiration of the Old Testament, we believe in the inspiration of the New Testament, and not only that but we'd go even further and say that we believe that these books are inerrant (they have no errors in the original manuscripts), they are infallible (incapable of leading us astray), and they're totally authoritative. So, if you're looking for the kind of church or denomination that has a very high view of scripture, then you might consider looking into the Presbyterian church. Like most Christians we confess the basics of Christianity. So if you've grown up in a church where you profess the Apostles' Creed or the Nicene Creed we are comfortable with all of those doctrines. We are trinitarian in that we believe that there is one God who eternally exists in three persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

If you are already familiar with these concepts and basic theology, you have a good first step into understanding what Presbyterianism is. I should further clarify and say that while we're Christians, we would belong to that big lump of churches called the Protestant churches- meaning that we are not Roman Catholic in any of our theology, structure, or practices. As Protestants, we "protest" against the Roman Catholic church and have officially done so since 1517 when Martin Luther began the Protestant Reformation.

As a Protestant denomination we confess what is sometimes called the "five solas" of the reformation (or the "five onlys" of the reformation) The five solas of the reformation are: sola scriptura (Scripture alone is our only and final author authority for faith and practice), solus Christus (we are saved only by Christ and not by anything we can add to it with our own works or contributions), sola gratia (we are saved by God's grace alone and not necessarily through the trappings of religion or a system like that), sola fide (saved by faith alone in Christ alone) and then finally soli deo gloria (all of this is for the glory of God alone). So those five: sola fide, sola gratia, solus christus, sola scriptura, and soli deo gloria. Another way to say this is *"We believe that salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, as revealed in the Scripture alone, to the glory of God alone."*

Where do we get our weird name- Presbyterians? What in the world does that mean? Well actually, it's just a Greek New Testament word. It's a very basic word in the New Testament (presbuteros) that means "elders." So we Presbyterians have a system of church government wherein each local church is led by a group of elders. So we don't have a pope, we don't have cardinals or bishops, or anything like that. Each church is led by its group of elders or pastors. Now if you were to come to a Presbyterian church to visit, what would you expect at worship? Well, we're not usually mega churches, we don't usually have an "American Idol style" auditorium with glowing flashing lights and fog and smoke and all that kinds of things. Presbyterian worship services are usually very simple. They're usually ordered by a liturgy of the word, the services are filled with

scripture through and through. Basically we hold to what's called the regulative principle of worship which means if it's not in the bible we probably shouldn't do it. So Presbyterian worship services have things like prayer, the singing of psalms hymns and spiritual songs, a time of confession of our sins, the preaching of the word of God, possibly one of the two sacraments (baptism or the Lord's Supper), and other prayers and benedictions and things like this. But, you won't find us doing weird things like pet blessings, or praying to the saints, or anything like that that isn't in the Bible. Our worship services are usually very simple and very reverent and I would say even very profound in a world that usually celebrates "the show" more than the actual content.

Now there are some peculiarities to being a Presbyterian that might be different from a little you know, and a little bit different from some other churches. Let me just throw out two of our peculiarities. First of all, in Presbyterian churches, you might find a little bit more emphasis on the sovereignty of God or even the doctrines of predestination/election (which are definitely found in the bible). Of course Scripture teaches that God is sovereign over all that He has made, but we lay the stress even on salvation as the sovereign work of God alone as over against the efforts or the freedoms of man. In other words, God saves sinners, they don't save themselves. So we have no problem whatsoever with affirming Predestination- it's right there in Romans 8, it's in Ephesians 1, and in any other number of books/chapters as well. The second thing, that is a little bit different from other churches, is we practice paedobaptism (or infant baptism). That practice is connected with our overall theology of the covenants- that God makes His promises to groups of people, including families. So, we would affirm that baptism is something that is even for the children of the people of God as they are "marked out" as belonging to the visible family of God. I realize that might be different for some people and you might not be used to that. But, we would love to sit down and talk about this more with you.

There's one more distinctive of Presbyterian churches (that we will focus on in this short article) and that is we call ourselves "confessional." We tend to take doctrine and our theology very seriously. So we are among those other denominations that have a standard confession (ie- explanation) of faith. For us, all of our doctrine and views can be found in the Westminster Confession of Faith- the puritan document written in 1647. So if you wonder about anything else that we believe you can probably find a very full and rich statement of faith, with tons of scriptural footnotes, in the Westminster Confession of Faith. We are also part of a denomination called the Presbyterian Church in America (or PCA for short). We are a very socially/theologically conservative, nationally connected (ie- not independent) denomination that has high ordination standards for its officers, and a national system of checks and balances. We also use something called the Book of Church Order to help us all organize/run our churches in a standardized way. We write everything down and try to do everything "decently and in order."

Hopefully that has served as a basic introduction to Presbyterianism. We're Bible-believing Christians, we take our faith very seriously, we love the word of God, and we're on a mission to share the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ with the world. So if you're looking for a church like that we'd love to have you come to a PCA church somewhere near you.