

“What Makes Us Presbyterian?” (Part 2 of 2)

Acts 13:44-48; Romans 8:28-30

Rev. Bill Pinches

Mason First Presbyterian Church

Mason, Michigan

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Every now and then I meet people who have some outdated ideas of what we Presbyterians believe. Good people, intelligent people, who learned some stuff about Presbyterianism at some point in their past – maybe from a church they were involved in, maybe from a history class they took long ago – and who are under the impression that what Presbyterians believed several hundred years ago is *still* what Presbyterians believe today. One person I know wanted to read John Calvin because she thought we still interpreted scripture through his lens. Another person started attending a Presbyterian church but was reluctant to join because she wasn't sure she could embrace the doctrine of predestination. Sometimes comes as a shock to people when they learn that where we were four or five hundred years ago is not necessarily where we are today. Sometimes, that causes relief!

What I'd like to do this morning is give you a birds'-eye view of how our theology has changed over time. I am painting, like I did last week, in very broad strokes; basically, I'm summarizing two semesters' worth of material into about 15 minutes. There's a lot I'm going to gloss over!

So first there was Martin Luther, who launched the Protestant Reformation in the year 1517 when he began publicly questioning certain doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church. John Calvin was 8 years old at the time; he was in the generation after Luther. Both of them started out as Roman Catholics; both reached a point where they felt that a break from the Catholic Church was necessary. Luther was a German; Calvin was a Frenchman; Calvin spent much of his career in Switzerland. Calvin was influenced by Luther, though he disagreed with some of Luther's interpretations of the Bible. In 1536 Calvin wrote *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, which was basically a handbook for pastors, to help them understand how Protestant doctrine differed from the Catholic Church. Calvin kept editing and expanding that book over the course of the next 24 years, and portions of it are still required reading at Presbyterian seminaries. Calvin also wrote commentaries on almost every single book of the Bible. It has been argued that Calvin was more of a *biblical interpreter* than a *theologian*. He was especially known for his views on salvation, the absolute sovereignty of God, election, and predestination. Verses like those that Jenny read earlier were especially important for Calvin.

Calvin's teachings gave rise to what is known as *Calvinism*. Calvinism is, basically, the body of teachings that Calvin's students and followers came to believe. It could be argued that his students spent more time studying *Calvin's writings* than they did the *Bible itself*. Over time Calvinism became

more and more rigid and precise. Eventually, the essential teachings of Calvinism came to be known as the “five points of Calvinism,” which can be summarized by an acronym called “TULIP”:

T: The *total depravity* of humanity: the idea that we are, by nature, inherently sinful; that we are not, by nature, inclined to love God; and that we are unable, on our own, to choose to trust in God.

U: The *unconditional election* of a portion of humanity: the idea that God chose, before time, those whom he would save, out of grace; that God chose to show mercy to some, and not others.

L: *Limited atonement*: the idea that Christ’s sacrificial death is sufficient to cover *everybody’s* sins, but God designed it so that it would have full effect only on those he had elected for salvation.

I: *Irresistible grace*: the idea that nobody who is truly elect can resist God’s salvation; that even if someone tried to resist the call of the gospel, if they were elect, they would not be able to do so.

P: The *perseverance of the saints*: the idea that since God is sovereign, those whom God has called will continue in faith to the end; even if they fall away, they will have no choice but to repent.

Those teachings have been important in our history, but they are really *not* where we are today.

The Presbyterian Church as we know it today was established by a Scotsman named John Knox. Knox studied under Calvin in Geneva and brought Calvin’s teachings to Scotland. Knox wrote a little treatise called *The Scots Confession*, which summarized the key points of Scottish Presbyterianism. That was the most important document for Scotch Presbyterians for a long time. Nearly a century later, a gathering of theologians at Westminster Abbey in London wrote a treatise called *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, and along with it the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* and the *Westminster Larger Catechism*. Those documents made their way back to Scotland where they effectively replaced Knox’s earlier treatise. When Scottish settlers brought Presbyterianism with them to the United States, they brought the Westminster Confession and Catechisms with them. When the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America was officially founded in 1789, the Westminster Confession and Catechisms became the *official* theological documents of the church. Every pastor had to affirm the doctrines in those Westminster standards. That started out okay, but over time some pastors took issue with some portions of the Westminster standards that they felt lacked biblical support. Over time it became common practice for pastors to declare their “scruples” with the Westminster standards prior to their ordination. By the year 1900, there was widespread discontent among Presbyterian clergy about many portions of the Westminster standards. Some suggested it was time to write a whole new confession. That effort failed, but the Presbyterian church did undertake a *revision* of the Westminster standards, removing or re-writing those portions that pastors found to be most problematic.

The next big change came in the 1960s. There was a strong feeling that the Westminster standards no longer reflected the *essentials* of Presbyterian history and tradition, and what was needed was not another re-write, but a whole new approach: not *one* confession of faith, but a whole *book* of confessions of faith. The Nicene and Apostles’ Creeds, from the early centuries of the church. The Scots Confession and several other documents from the Protestant Reformation in other countries. The

Westminster standards. A document from Germany in the 1930s, boldly declaring that we are called to follow *Jesus Christ*, not any particular political movement or ideology (i.e., we follow *Jesus*, not *Hitler*). And a new document, written here in the United States, that affirms – among other things – the necessity of interpreting scripture with an attention to its original context. All these documents were combined together into what is called *The Book of Confessions*. This compendium effectively replaced the Westminster Standards as the “heart and soul” of Presbyterian theology. On the one hand, this solution was *brilliant*, because now we have, at our fingertips, classic theological documents from *throughout* our history, and it shows us a trajectory of where we have been over time. But it also makes things difficult for us. When somebody wants to know, “What do Presbyterians believe?”, we can point them to this document, but the reality is that *none* of these documents are *binding* in any way. Also, it was a whole lot easier (and less time consuming) to read a 30-page treatise than it is to read a 300-page compendium. Every time we ordain Pastors and Elders and Deacons, we ask them to affirm that they “sincerely receive and adopt the essential tenets of the Reformed faith as expressed in the confessions of our church as authentic and reliable expositions of what Scripture leads us to believe and do.” That wording is important. What we are saying is that the confessions in the Book of Confessions *express the essential tenets of the Reformed faith*, and that those “essential tenets” are “authentic and reliable expositions” of what the Bible leads us to believe and do – but here’s the thing: *since 1967, we have steadfastly refused to define precisely what those “essential tenets” are*. What I mean is, *no one of these documents is any more binding than any other, and they do not all say exactly the same thing*, so what we have done is created a situation in which there is a lot of “wiggle room,” so to speak. A lot of people appreciate that “wiggle room,” the fact that there is *not* one single binding document, but at the same time it makes it very difficult to tell anybody – Presbyterians or otherwise! – *here’s what we Presbyterians believe*. Many other churches and denominations have a very precise list of essential doctrines in the church. *We do not*. That is both a strength and a weakness. It means we have a pretty big tent, that there is a *lot* of room for diversity of opinion – but there has also been a lot of internal argument since 1967, and there have been three large waves of churches and pastors leaving since then. It’s easier to feel a sense of *unity* and *cohesion* when there’s a clearer sense of *this is who we are*.

But we did make another attempt to summarize our key beliefs. In 1983, when the northern and southern branches of the church reunited (they had been divided ever since the Civil War!), theologians on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line wrote a new confession, just two pages long. I have given you copies of that document. It summarizes key biblical teachings about Jesus, God, and the Holy Spirit. This document, which is also part of our Book of Confessions, is not *binding*, but it’s a well-crafted summary, and I would commend it for your use. If you look carefully, you can still find traces of classic doctrines like election and salvation and predestination, but they’re a lot softer than they used to be!

That’s a quick overview of where we’ve been. There’s just one more thing that I really need to say: to become a member of the Presbyterian Church (USA), you only have to believe two things. You don’t have to believe every line of the Westminster Confession of Faith, or the Apostles’ Creed, or even the Brief Statement of Faith. All you need to do is be able to affirm that that *Jesus Christ is Lord ...* and that he’s your *Savior*. That’s all. *Lord and Savior*. Those are the two doctrines that matter *most*.

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