

CLASS TWO

What Does it mean to be a Presbyterian ?



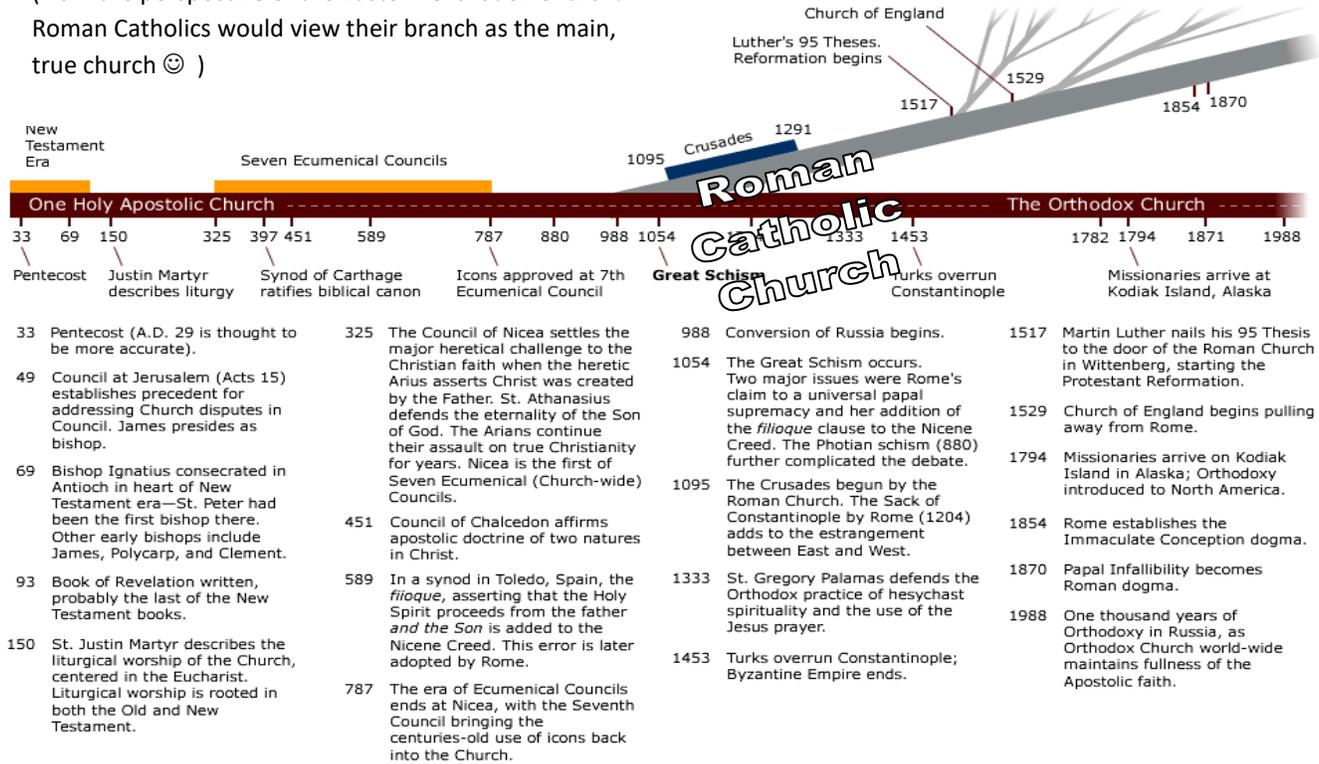
Part One: A quick primer in Church History

or, Where Presbyterians fit in the Christian Family Tree

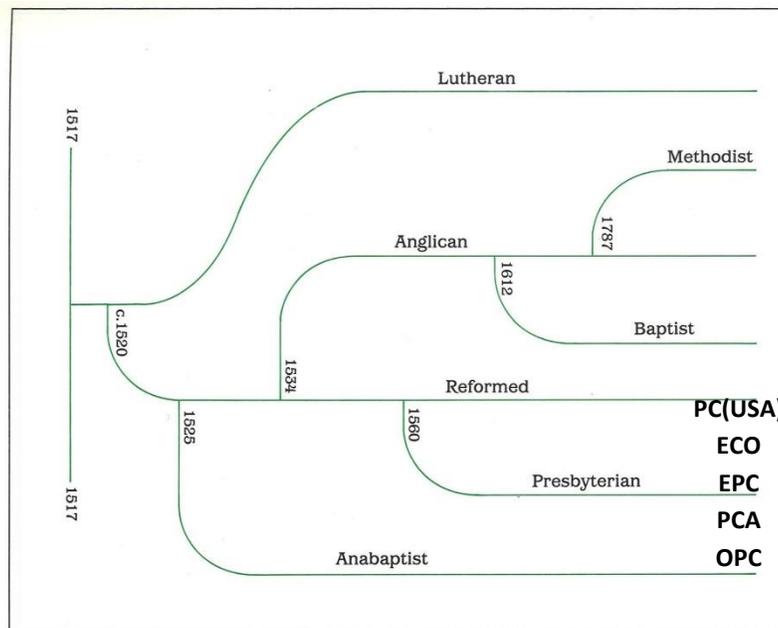
We are here – see detail of Protestant branch below.

A TIME LINE OF CHURCH HISTORY

(from the perspective of the Eastern Orthodox Church!
Roman Catholics would view their branch as the main, true church ☺)



NOTES: In the early church there was no pope or central authority – there was a loose collection of patriarchs (bishops) in major towns. The church had no political power until Constantine became Roman Emperor in 323 AD. While there were small splinter groups breaking off throughout church history – virtually all churches today embrace the council of Nicea in 325 and most embrace all seven ecumenical councils. These occurred before the great schism of 1054 that split the Eastern (Orthodox) and the Western (Roman Catholic) churches. Thus virtually all Christian churches today embrace the teachings of the Apostles Creed of the early church and most embrace the teachings of the Nicene Creed



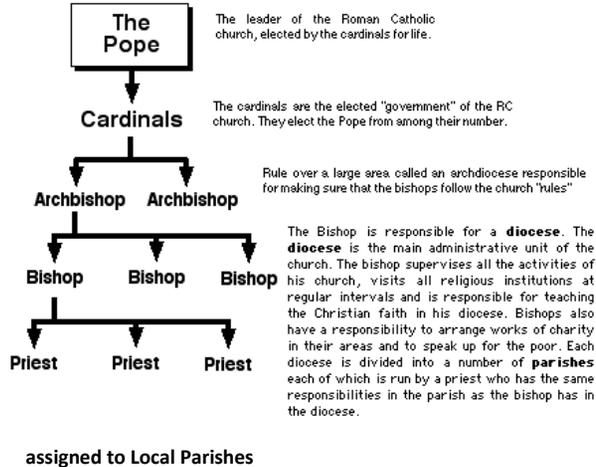
44. A Family Tree of Protestant Denominational Groups

Part Two: Three Styles of Church Government

or, "How do decisions get made in the Presbyterian Church?"

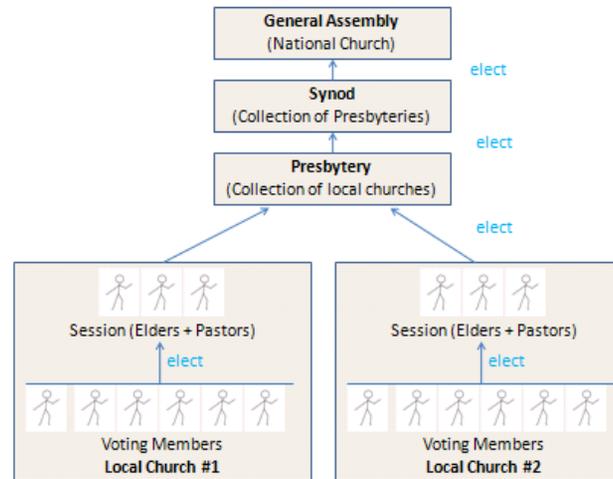
Episcopal (Bishop)

Hierarchical form that rules from the top down
 Central Authority
 No votes by members



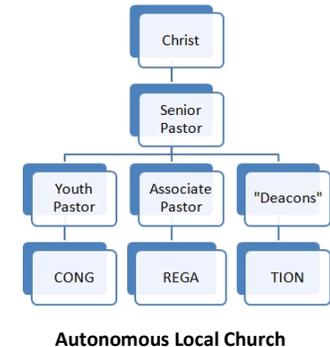
Presbyterian (Elders)

Representative from elected from bottom up
 Connectional church with layers of government
 Members elect Elders & committees



Congregational (Members)

Democratic with no authority above local church
 Pastor either mini-pope or elected Elders
 No votes OR everyone votes on everything



As shown in the family tree, there are a number of different Presbyterian denominations. Leverington Presbyterian church is part of the PC(U.S.A). Our denominational Constitution consists of two books: The Book of Confessions, and The Book of Order. The Book of Confessions talks about what we believe, and The Book of Order talks about the rules and the organization of our church. The Book of Confessions contains statements of faith such as The Apostles' Creed and The Nicene Creed. The Book of Order includes rules such as the qualifications for ordination of Pastors, Elders, and Deacons. Some may say "we don't need denominations and all I need is the bible." We believe that being open to the wisdom of the historic church over the past 2000 years and the strengths of an elected Church government are more likely to create a healthy, bible-based, Christ Honoring church over the long haul than just making up church based on our own whims. All of us are tempted to create God and the gospel in our own image. We need the diverse wisdom of the whole church to help counteract our natural drift towards man-made religion.

Part Three: A Snapshot of our Church's beliefs

We believe a church should be a community of people trying to live and treat each other the way Jesus lived and treated people. We are part of the Reformed tradition. Here are three key principles from our church's constitution (found in The Book of Order):

1. "The Church universal consists of all persons in every nation ... who profess faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and commit themselves to live in fellowship under his rule." (G-4.0101)
2. "God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in anything contrary to his Word, or beside it, in matters of faith or worship" (G-1.0301)
3. "...the Holy Scriptures are the only rule of faith and manners; that no Church governing body ought to pretend to make laws to bind the conscience in virtue of their own authority..." (G-1.0307)

In short, our stance is much like that of John Chrysostom (374 A.D. - 407 A.D.) who wrote:

"In essentials, unity. In non-essentials, charity. In all things, Jesus Christ."

The beliefs of our church over its history are contained in our BOOK OF CONFESIONS. The very first entry, The Apostles' Creed, is perhaps the most succinct statement of what we believe.

I believe in God the Father Almighty,
Maker of heaven and earth,

I believe in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord;
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, dead, and buried;
he descended into hell;
on the third day he rose again from the dead;
he ascended into heaven,
and sits on the right hand
of God the Father Almighty;
from there he shall come
to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit;
the holy church; the communion of saints;
the forgiveness of sins;
the resurrection of the body;
and the life everlasting. Amen.

Particulars of the Presbyterian Church:

An emphasis on:

- The Trinity (note bold words in Apostles Creed @ left)
- Utter dependence upon the grace of God for existence & salvation
- The sovereignty of God
↕ Tension
- Engagement with culture
- The Authority of Scripture
↕ Tension
- The freedom of Conscience
- Nuanced Theology ← Strength & Weakness!

"Everything done in decency and in order"

Part Four: Overview For People who like to read !

or, Introduction to Presbyterian Theology, Worship, History & Government

Adapted From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia “...” indicates where I have cut out details.

Presbyterian denominations derive their name from the Greek word *presbýteros* (πρεσβύτερος), "elder." (Presbyterian church in Acts 14:23, 20:17, Titus 1:5).

Characteristics

Presbyterianism refers to many different Christian churches adhering to the Calvinist theological tradition within Protestantism, and organized according to a characteristic Presbyterian polity. **Presbyterian theology typically emphasizes the sovereignty of God, the authority of the Scriptures, and the necessity of grace through faith in Christ.**

Presbyterians distinguish themselves from other denominations by doctrine, institutional organization (or "church order") and worship;

often using a "Book of Order" to regulate common practice and order. The origins of the Presbyterian churches were in Calvinism, which is no longer emphasized in some contemporary branches. ... Presbyterians place great importance upon education and life-long learning. Continuous study of the scriptures, theological writings, and understanding and interpretation of church doctrine are embodied in several statements of faith and catechisms formally adopted by various branches of the church [often referred to as 'subordinate standards'; see Doctrine (below)]. It is generally considered that the point of such learning is to enable one to put one's faith into practice; some Presbyterians generally exhibit their faith in action as well as words, by generosity, hospitality, and the constant pursuit of social justice and reform, as well as proclaiming the gospel of Christ.

Presbyterianism originated primarily in Scotland and was confirmed as the means of Church Government in Scotland by the Act of Union in 1707. ...Modern Presbyterianism traces its institutional roots back to the Scottish Reformation. **Local congregations are governed by Sessions made up of representatives of the congregation, a conciliar approach which is found at other levels of decision-making (Presbytery, Synod and General Assembly).** ...There are no bishops in Presbyterianism... The office of elder is another distinctive mark of Presbyterianism: these are specially ordained non-clergy who take part in local pastoral care and decision-making at all levels. The office of deacon is geared toward the care of members, their families, and the surrounding community. In some congregations active elders and deacons serve a three-year term and then rotate off for at least a year. The offices of pastor, elder, and deacon all commence with ordination; once a person is ordained, he holds that title for the rest of his life. An individual may serve as both an elder and a deacon.

History

In western Europe, the authority of the Roman Catholic Church remained largely unquestioned until the Renaissance in the 15th century. The invention of the printing press in Germany around 1440 made it possible for common people to have access to printed materials including the Bible. The public availability of the Bible encouraged private devotion away from the structure of the Roman Catholic Church. Printed materials also served to expose the populace to religious thinkers who had begun to question the authority and integrity of the Church. One such figure, Martin Luther, a German monk and professor, enumerated this dissent in his 95 Theses. In 1517, Martin Luther famously posted his grievances on a church door in Wittenberg, Germany. This moment is said to have marked the beginning of the Protestant Reformation, a theological movement intended to reform the Church.^[1] As the Catholic Church resisted the reformers, the Church split and different theological movements bore different denominations. Presbyterianism was especially influenced by the French/Swiss theologian, John Calvin, who is credited with the development of Reformed theology and the work of John Knox, a Scotsman who studied with Calvin in Geneva, Switzerland and brought his teachings back to Scotland. The Presbyterian church traces its ancestry back primarily to England and Scotland. In August of 1560 the Scottish Parliament adopted the Protestant Confession of Faith as the creed of the Scottish Kingdom. In December of that year, the First Book of Discipline was published, outlining important doctrinal issues but also establishing regulations for church government, including the creation of ten ecclesiastical districts with pointed superintendents which later became known as presbyteries.^[2]

Governance

Presbyterian government is by councils (known as *courts*) of elders. Teaching and ruling elders are ordained and convene in the lowest council known as a *session* or *consistory* responsible for the discipline, nurture, and mission of the local congregation. Teaching elders (pastors) have responsibility for teaching, worship, and performing sacraments. Pastors are called by individual congregations. A congregation issues a call for the pastor's service, but this call must be ratified by the local presbytery.

Ruling elders are usually laymen (and laywomen in some denominations) who are elected by the congregation and ordained to serve with the teaching elders, assuming responsibility for nurture and leadership of the congregation. Often, especially in larger congregations, the elders delegate the practicalities of buildings, finance, and temporal ministry to the needy in the congregation to a distinct group of officers (sometimes called deacons, which are ordained in some denominations). This group may variously be known as a 'Deacon Board', 'Board of Deacons' 'Diaconate', or 'Deacons' Court'.

Above the sessions exist presbyteries, which have area responsibilities. These are composed of teaching elders and ruling elders from each of the constituent congregations. The presbytery sends representatives to a broader regional or national assembly, generally known as the General Assembly, although an intermediate level of a *synod* sometimes exists. This congregation / presbytery / synod / general assembly schema is based on the historical structure of the larger Presbyterian churches, such as the Church of Scotland or the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)...

Doctrine

Presbyterianism is historically a confessional tradition. This has two implications. The obvious one is that confessional churches express their faith in the form of "confessions of faith," which have some level of authoritative status. However this is based on a more subtle point: In confessional churches, theology is not solely an individual matter. While individuals are encouraged to understand Scripture, and may challenge the current institutional understanding, theology is carried out by the community as whole. It is this community understanding of theology that is expressed in confessions....^[5]

The Presbyterian Church USA has adopted the Book of Confessions, which reflects the inclusion of other Reformed confessions in addition to the *Westminster* documents. These other documents include ancient creedal statements, (the Nicene Creed, the Apostles' Creed), 16th century Reformed confessions (the Scots Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, the Second Helvetic Confession, all of which were written before Calvinism had developed as a particular strand of Reformed doctrine), and 20th century documents (The Theological Declaration of Barmen and the Confession of 1967).

Worship

Presbyterian Denominations who trace their heritage to the British Isles usually organise their church services inspired by the principles in the Directory of Public Worship, developed by the Westminster Assembly in the 1640s. This directory documented Reformed worship practices and theology adopted and developed over the preceding century by British Puritans, initially guided by John Calvin and John Knox. It was enacted as law by the Scottish Parliament, and became one of the foundational documents of Presbyterian church legislation elsewhere.

Historically, the driving principle in the development of the standards of Presbyterian worship is the Regulative principle of worship, which specifies that (in worship), what is not commanded is forbidden.^[6]

Presbyterians traditionally have held the Worship position that there are only two sacraments:

- Baptism, in which they hold to the paedobaptist (i.e. infant baptism as well as baptising unbaptised adults) and the Aspersion (sprinkling) or Affusion (pouring) positions, rather than the Immersion position
- The Lord's Supper (also known as Communion)

...There is not one fixed "Presbyterian" worship style. Although there are set services for the "Lord's Day", one can find a service to be evangelical and even revivalist in tone (especially in some conservative denominations), or strongly liturgical, approximating the practices of Lutheranism or Anglicanism (especially where Scottish tradition is esteemed), or semi-formal, allowing for a balance of hymns, preaching, and congregational participation (favored by probably most American Presbyterians).

Part 5: What are the challenges of our denomination today ?

The Presbyterian Church has a history of splitting into new denominations. On the one hand this is sad, because Christ called us to be one united church and fighting and separating over secondary issues should be avoided. On the other hand, it is a result of our high view of freedom of conscience – we take beliefs and convictions seriously and so sometimes out of conscience a person or church may move from one Presbyterian denomination to another.

Currently our denomination is wrestling with the same hot button social issues as every other denomination. It is unclear what the future holds for the denomination – it may continue to fracture. However, individual local churches are given great freedom – there is a very wide diversity of theological convictions in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Just because our national office declares something, it does not mean that a local church has to accept or embrace that stance. We are only required to stay within the bounds of The Book of Order and The Book of Confessions – and these form a very broad tent. The leadership of Leverington Presbyterian church frankly thinks there are a lot of things that our denomination has gotten wrong. However, our church is free to be who we are, to preach the gospel, and to work to live out the truly beautiful aspects of Reformed Theology. Rather than focus on denominational politics, we choose to focus on being faithful followers of Jesus Christ in our local community here and now.

Here are a few of the things that you should know about Leverington Presbyterian Church:

1. We have a very high view of scripture as the Word of God. While we believe that people of good will can disagree, and that the very best scholarly methods should be used to interpret the bible, we see the bible as the final authority in matters of faith and practice.
2. We worship the Triune God. We believe that we are saved from the eternal consequence of our sins by Grace alone through the work of Jesus Christ in his life, death, and physical resurrection from the dead. There is no other name under Heaven by which we can be saved.
3. Christians are called to turn away from sin and live a moral and just life, pleasing to God - as revealed through the scriptures.

For a more detailed explanation of what we believe, see <http://levpres.org/about-us/what-we-believe/>

HOMEWORK FOLLOWING CLASS TWO:

1. Review www.levpres.org/about-us/what-we-believe/
You can just go to www.levpres.org and type “what we believe” in the search box.

Ask yourself “Would I be comfortable being associated with a church that believed these things ?”