

What makes us Presbyterian?

Born into it? Married into it? Looked around and really liked it...

I was visiting one day with a couple and the husband told me he came from a long line of Presbyterians; that his ancestors had helped start a church on Long Island, one of the oldest Presbyterian churches in the United States.

His wife said she was just a second generation Presbyterian, and then told her story. Their family had moved into town during the Depression, and the Baptist preacher came by, inviting them all to church.

Her father told him, “Well, we’d like to, but we just don’t have ‘Sunday-go-to-meeting clothes; it’s kind of embarrassing.”

The preacher told them not to worry, and first thing next morning he was by the house and dropped off boxes of clothes, nice clothes.

A few weeks later, the preacher came back and said, “I haven’t seen your family in church; did something happen? Weren’t those clothes nice enough?”

“Oh, those clothes...we’ve never had anything that nice; they were so nice we decided we could go to the Presbyterian church!”

Now, clothes don’t make us Presbyterian, but what is it that makes us Presbyterians “*presbyterian*”?

Our name, presbyterian, comes from a Greek word which means ‘elder’ – and it points us to our form of government – not a system of beliefs or how we worship, but how we govern ourselves.

I had one family join a church I served – they were Methodist, but their first visit was on the day we ordained elders, and he was really taken with the officers coming forward as part of the leadership of the church.

He was right – one of the things that makes us Presbyterian is our form of government – different from the Baptist or Methodists, Episcopalians or Catholics.

Yet, to point out something that is different from others about being Presbyterian is to neglect that what makes us Presbyterian is first and foremost that we are Christian –

What makes us Presbyterian is that we are Christian first, Presbyterian second. Our understanding of our faith and life as Presbyterians begins with those beliefs that all Christians hold in common.

Yet it could be that one of the problems we have as Presbyterians is that we really aren’t that knowledgeable about our faith as Christians.

In a very recent survey of religious knowledge, atheists and agnostics, Jews and Mormons outscored evangelical Protestants, mainline Protestants and Catholics on questions about the core teachings, history and leading figures of major world religions.

These are among the key findings of a nationwide poll conducted by the Pew Research Center’s Forum on Religion & Public Life just a few months ago.

While previous surveys by the Pew Research Center have shown that America is among the most religious of the world’s developed nations, this survey shows that large numbers of Americans are not well informed about the tenets, practices, history and leading figures of major faith traditions -- including their own.

For example, about half of Protestants (next Sunday we’ll look at what it is to be Protestant) cannot correctly identify Martin Luther as the person whose writings and actions inspired the Protestant Reformation, which made their religion a separate branch of Christianity

One thing the survey did show was that some of the factors linked with religious knowledge include reading Scripture at least once a week and talking about religion with friends and family.

That's why regular attendance in worship and Sunday School and participation in study groups and fellowship and mission activities are so important -

It underscores the point that it's more than clothes that make us Presbyterian or Christian, and there's no better time to think about this than today on World Communion Sunday, as we celebrate the Lord's Supper with Christians around the world.

Yes, it's true that World Communion Sunday was started by Presbyterians in 1936, but it was because we take seriously the fact that we are Christian first, Presbyterian second, and that we need to remember, as we say, "this is not a Presbyterian table, it is the Lord's Table."

Our Presbyterian Book of Order affirms several beliefs that are shared by all Christians – it's what we mean when we say we believe in 'the holy catholic church...'

These are the beliefs that make up what C.S. Lewis would call 'mere Christianity,' the central convictions of all Christians around the world.

I want to mention three: One is the authority of Scripture, a second is the belief in the Trinity – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – and the third is the belief that Jesus is fully God and fully human – the incarnation.

First of all – we believe, as all Christians do, in the authority of Scripture – the Bible is the Word of God.

Let me be clear, believing in the authority of Scripture is not the same as the interpretation of Scripture – too often we accuse those who disagree with us on interpretations as not "believing in the Bible," of not "accepting the authority of the Bible."

That's just not true – those differing interpretations are what make us Baptists or

Methodists or Episcopalians or Lutherans or Catholics or Presbyterians – but what we all agree on is that the Bible is the Word of God, the authority for our faith and life.

And because we all agree on that – we are all cousins in the Christian faith, part of the same family with one Lord, one faith...

We believe in the authority of Scripture, and secondly, we believe in the Trinity – God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – and let me say that there are so many different ways to try and explain it, picture it, describe the Trinity; it's easier, I think, to look at what this Triune God does.

Christians everywhere believe that the creator of everything that exists is God – Three-in-One – look at our Scripture lesson as the gospel account of creation: The Father is the source of all that is; and the Son and the Holy Spirit participate in the shaping and design of what the Father creates.

I think we can best remember this when we have a baptism – that's the phrase we use, "I baptize you in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."

It all has to do with a community, a relationship, and a promise of new creation based on an active, dynamic, creating, living God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Because of this basic, shared belief in the Trinity, we accept the baptism of our cousins in the faith. We are not baptized Presbyterian, but as a Christian first, and we as Presbyterians make promises, not for this Presbyterian congregation alone, but as the body of Christ.

With Christians everywhere and of all time, we believe in the authority of Scripture, God as three-in-one – the Trinity - and we believe that Jesus is fully God and fully human, the incarnation.

Of the incarnation, John writes that 'he came into the world but the world knew him not' – and some of that is what Martin Luther was referring to when he said, "The mystery of Christ, that he sunk himself in human flesh [became human], is beyond all human understanding."

But this business of the incarnation is more than just a matter of mere theological speculation, what it means is that in the person of Jesus, at that moment at that place where he is, we are standing in the very presence of God who looks deep within our heart and challenges you and me to become the person whom we've been created to be!

As one of the early church theologians said:  
“[Jesus] became what we are that he might make us what he is.”

Not only does Jesus come to us; he also draws us to God. Jesus, the Giver of the Spirit, Jesus the Way, the Truth, and the Light, he is our access point to God, especially through our serving and sharing in the sacrament of communion.

And there it is – Christian first, Presbyterian second - We are joined with one another as members of the body of Christ not only this day of World Communion Sunday, but every day, from now through eternity.

Randy Taylor – at the end of communion, would pause – “have all been served? Then go and in the name of Jesus, serve those out there, who have not been served.”

We are at this table as the holy, catholic church who are the people of God on God's mission.

**TO GOD BE THE GLORY.**

Let us pray:

Eternal God, we give you thanks for this holy mystery in which you have given yourself to us. Grant that we may go into the world, with the gospel in our heart and in the strength of the Holy Spirit, to give ourselves for others in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Amen.