

**First Presbyterian Church
Southampton, New York
“How to Spell Presbyterian”**

**Exodus 20:2 – 6
Philippians 2:5 – 11**

June 7, 2015

Okay, first of all, I want to see a show of hands: how many of you realized that the word “Presbyterian” in the sermon title... is misspelled? Come on, be honest! It says “Presytberian,” not “Presbyterian!” If you caught it, you win a free hotdog at the picnic after church! And that’s no typo, by the way... I spelled the word wrong on purpose, to draw our attention to the focus of the sermon... which isn’t really “how to spell Presbyterian,” but more like, what it *is* that makes a Presbyterian, a Presbyterian. Or, to put it another way, what are the key beliefs and convictions which make us what we are as Presbyterian Christians? I get asked every so often to preach a sermon on this subject; so, today, I’m going to do just that... and highlight some of the distinctive characteristics which have defined this family of faith for 375 years.

Now, of course, we all know that what *really* distinguishes us Presbyterians is potlucks, rummage sales, committee meetings, fifteen minute sermons, decent coffee at fellowship hour, and the occasional cocktail party! And more committee meetings. And a church service that doesn’t last too, too long. And, uh... committee meetings. But, aside from those *obviously* Presbyterian qualities... what are the things which, historically, going way back to the days of John Calvin and the Protestant Reformation, identify the Presbyterian stripe of Christian?

Well, after giving the matter some thought, I’ve come up with a short list of eight convictions and characteristics which really make us Presbyterians “tick.” And relax... I’ve got just a short little snippet to say about each one, so we won’t be here all day! Anyway, the list of what makes Presbyterians, Presbyterians, in no particular order, looks something like this:

First, we Presbyterians believe that **Almighty God is absolutely sovereign**. Or, as I sometimes like to put it, we believe that God is God, and we are not! We believe that God is the Creator of the universe... the giver of all life... the One who keeps this whole, enormous cosmos in order... and, generally, the One who rules, absolutely, over all.

We believe that God owes us nothing; and that we can’t put God into our debt; and, that, despite what a lot of TV preachers say, we can’t bargain with God, or pay Him off, or manipulate Him in order to get our way, or otherwise trifle with Him like He was some kind of cosmic used-car salesman. Along with the ancient Israelites, we Presbyterians say that the Lord our God is one Lord... and we are to love Him with all our heart, and mind, and strength. So, that’s the first thing that we Presbyterians believe, and it’s a biggie: that our God is sovereign.

Which brings us to the **second** thing that we Presbyterians believe, which is that this awesome, sovereign, all-powerful God **loves us** completely, totally, and unconditionally. In fact, the only reason that we exist at all, and have a relationship with God at all, is because of the love that God had for us... even before there *was* an “us!”

This is sometimes a hard concept for us to get our hearts and minds around... because of the age-old popularity of the idea that God is angry, and vengeful, and impossible to please, and

just looking for the slightest reason to send us all packing off to Hell. Remember the Jonathan Edwards sermon I preached a few weeks ago... about sinners in the hands of an angry God! Pretty grim stuff, right? But that's the image that comes to mind for many people, when you mention the name of God. Hellfire, brimstone, and eternal punishment.

Well, don't get me wrong: God does care about justice, and God surely isn't happy about sin; but that doesn't mean that God doesn't still love us, and care for us, and desire for us to live every day and for all eternity in the blessed bonds of His peace, and His grace, and His... love. In fact, as the Gospel of John famously tells us in chapter three, verse sixteen: "*For God so loved the world that He gave his only Son; that whoever believes in Him might have eternal life.*" So that's Presbyterian belief number two, and it's a biggie as well: our God loves us, and loves us greatly.

Okay, moving on to number **three**, we Presbyterians believe that **we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone**. The New Testament is very clear about this: that we have salvation, a place in God's kingdom, the promise of eternal life, 100% because God loves us, and desires to give this gift to us. We can't earn salvation; we can't deserve salvation; we can't buy salvation; we can't barter for salvation on EBay. We either receive it as the gift that it is... or else we don't receive it at all. This, again, can be a very hard concept for us to receive and internalize. I mean, we may accept it on an intellectual level... on a technical, doctrinal, "book" level. But on the level of the heart and soul, it can be extremely difficult for us to overcome the good old American ethic of works-righteousness... as in, I don't deserve it, if I haven't worked for it and earned it.

Hey, it's great to have a good work ethic. In fact, we could add "good work ethic" to the list of qualities that Presbyterians value and esteem. As Christian disciples, we're *supposed* to be diligent, and industrious, and reliable... and we *should* avoid laziness, and indolence, and sloth. It's just that we do not, and cannot, apply that principle to God's gift of salvation. We should always do our best to do good works, to live holy and faithful lives, to be kind, and generous, and merciful, and just. But we do all those things not to *earn* God's favor... but in *response* to God's favor, already freely given to us in His Son, Jesus.

So, if you're stressing yourself out about how you're going to work your way into heaven... relax. You can't do it! And, fortunately, you don't *need* to do it... thanks to the love that God has for you in Jesus Christ. So that's Presbyterian belief number three: we are saved by God's grace, through faith in Jesus Christ.

Our **fourth** key Presbyterian belief is that **the Bible is God's Word to us**; it is, as our ordination vows put it, "*the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the church universal.*" We believe that the witness of the Old and New Testaments is, with the guidance of God's Holy Spirit, our authoritative blueprint for living the life of Christian faith and discipleship. In other words, as has been said of us for many centuries, we are "people of the book."

Now, this one can be tricky, because there are endless misunderstandings of just what it means for the Bible to be "God's Word to us." For example, some people want to apply a literalist, or fundamentalist, approach to the Bible... as if every single word is to be taken, as Princeton Seminary New Testament scholar Bruce Metzger used to say, "with flat-footed literalism." The problem is that this way of understanding the Bible ignores the historical context of the writings, the original intent of the authors, and the fact that vast portions of the Scriptures were written not as straight historical records at all, but as theological documents.

At the same time, other people treat the Bible like it's a book of suggestions and quaint reminiscences of some bygone era... which doesn't really have much authority at all. They give it a kind of superficial quasi-reverence, but they don't really pay much attention to it, and certainly don't treat it like its God's Word. And within those two extremes are a wide variety of other opinions and approaches. So, where do we as Presbyterians come down on the biblical question?

Well, we believe that the biblical texts are human documents; written under the inspiration and guidance of the Holy Spirit; which witness to God's saving acts with His people throughout the centuries. We understand that the Bible contains history, theology, liturgy, poetry, and prophecy. There are gospels, letters, apocalyptic writings, hymns, sermons, and various other kinds of writings... each of which must be read and understood on its own terms. Therefore it's very important to learn as much as we can about the people who wrote the Scriptures, and what they were really trying to express in the documents which they've produced. We believe that when we read, study, and try our best to understand the Bible... we find all that we need to build a meaningful and life-giving relationship with our Heavenly Father. So that's Presbyterian belief number four: we believe that the Bible is God's authoritative Word to us.

A **fifth** key thing that we Presbyterians believe in, is **the resurrection**: both of Jesus, on the first Easter morning... and of we ourselves, at the end of the age. The New Testament teaches, and Presbyterians believe, that our ultimate destiny is to be raised to new life, as Jesus Himself was raised... and that life will be lived in the new creation which God will bring about when the current creation one day passes away.

This is an often-misunderstood piece of basic Christian teaching; but it was certainly of paramount importance to the people who witnessed the resurrected Jesus, and who then went on to found the earliest Christian churches. In fact, you can't read the New Testament without noticing the critical importance of the resurrection to everything that those first Christian believers thought, and said, and did, and hoped for. The resurrection colored everything. So that's belief number five: Presbyterians believe in the resurrection.

Number **six**: we Presbyterians believe that **worship**, what we're doing right now, is the single most important thing that we do together as a church family. We do many important things together, of course... like Christian Education, managing the church finances and budget, taking care of the church buildings and grounds, caring for the sick and needy, enjoying times of fellowship, and proclaiming the truth of the gospel to the larger community. Those are all critically important components of our mission as a church. But they **all** are driven, empowered, focused, and guided by what we do in here, every Sunday morning at 10:00 a.m.

When we come together to bring our worship and praise to Almighty God; when we are challenged and inspired by the proclamation of the gospel message; when we are nourished spiritually by the sacraments, and our prayers, and our common vision as disciples of our Lord Jesus; when we open our hearts and minds to that experience... we are then enabled to go out and do all the important things that we are called to do as a community of faith. Our worship is the lifeblood of our ministry; and that's why it's the sixth important belief that we hold dear as Presbyterians.

Number **seven** is our Presbyterian love of, and respect for, **education and learning**. And not just religious education, but all education, in every field of inquiry. And, further, we believe that what we learn in those other fields of inquiry helps to shape, and guide, and deepen our understanding of God and the world that He's made. You sometimes hear people say that

Christians are un-scientific, or simple-minded, or stuck in a 19th century way of thinking about the world. Well, that may be the case for some ultra-conservative branches of the faith, but for Presbyterians nothing could be further from the truth. We welcome discoveries in other branches of learning, and believe that our understanding of our Heavenly Father is enhanced and enriched as we learn more and more about His Creation. So that's number seven: we Presbyterians love to learn.

Eighth and finally, we Presbyterians believe that **we are all ministers**, created by our Heavenly Father for good works in His name. Note: this doesn't mean that we're all pastors... that's a specific office of ministry, with specific responsibilities. But we are all involved in the ongoing work of the church's mission and ministry. And that's simply another way of saying that we are all called by God to use our gifts, skills, talents, and interests to be about the work of His kingdom... and that we all have an important part to play in the overall ministry of our church family. None of us is a mere spectator... we are all key participants!

Now this list just scratches the surface of how to spell Presbyterian... but, hopefully, it will help us to understand a little bit better who we really are, and what we really stand for. May it be our daily quest to fulfill that wonderful calling! In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen!