



FIRST PRESBYTERIAN  
SHREVEPORT

Exploring Church Membership  
**PRESBYTERIAN 101**

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## THE CALLING OF THE CHURCH

Presbyterians understand the Church as **the body of Christ**, called into being by God and equipped for God's mission in the world. The Church does not exist for itself, but to bear witness to what God is doing.

The Church is called to be:

- **A Community of Faith** – trusting God alone and grounding life in Christ
- **A Community of Hope** – living in the confidence that God is making all things new
- **A Community of Love** – practicing forgiveness, reconciliation, and compassion
- **A Community of Witness** – pointing beyond itself to God's grace through word and action

These four commitments—faith, hope, love, and witness—guide everything Presbyterians believe and do. To be the church is to live these values together, forming and shaping a community rooted and sustained in them.

**A TIME FOR SHARING – Please share...**

- **Your name**
- **How you first got connected to this congregation**
- **In the image below, which child best represents you (most recently) when it comes to your relationship with God (or the church, in general)?**
- **One thing you're hoping for—or curious about—as you explore what it means to be Presbyterian or church membership**

You don't need to be eloquent or theological. This is simply about being known.



## PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH HISTORY

### REFORMATION TO PRESENT

Presbyterianism grows out of the **Protestant Reformation** of the 16th century. The Reformers did not seek to abandon the church, but to **reform it according to Scripture and the gospel**.

Key emphases of the Reformation include:

- The authority of **Scripture** in matters of faith and life
- Salvation as a gift of **grace**, received through **faith**
- **Jesus Christ** as the sole mediator between God and humanity
- All of life lived for the **glory of God**

The Reformation also made Scripture accessible to ordinary people through translation and printing, reshaping worship and theology.

### CHANGES IN WORSHIP AND CHURCH LIFE

Reformed worship shifted away from spectacle and toward participation.

Key changes included:

- Preaching and Scripture at the center of worship
- Worship conducted in the language of the people
- Simpler church buildings emphasizing the pulpit and Word
- Active congregational participation rather than passive observation

Worship was understood not only as praise, but as **service offered to God**, shaping daily discipleship.

### CORE CONVICTIONS

Reformed Christians summarized their theology with enduring convictions:

- **Grace Alone** – salvation is God’s gift, not something we earn
- **Faith Alone** – trust in Christ, not works, unites us to God
- **Scripture Alone** – Scripture is the final authority for faith and life
- **Christ Alone** – Jesus is the center of salvation and reconciliation
- **Glory to God Alone** – all of life is lived in gratitude to God



The church is understood as *reformed and always being reformed* according to the Word of God.



## KEY FIGURES OF THE REFORMATION

### Desiderius Erasmus (Netherlands)

- Biblical scholar and humanist
- Emphasized education, Scripture in original languages, and humility
- Helped prepare the ground for reform by encouraging faithful study of Scripture

### Martin Luther (Germany)

- Monk and professor in Wittenberg
- Emphasized justification by grace through faith
- Translated the Bible into German, making Scripture accessible

### Ulrich Zwingli (Zurich, Switzerland)

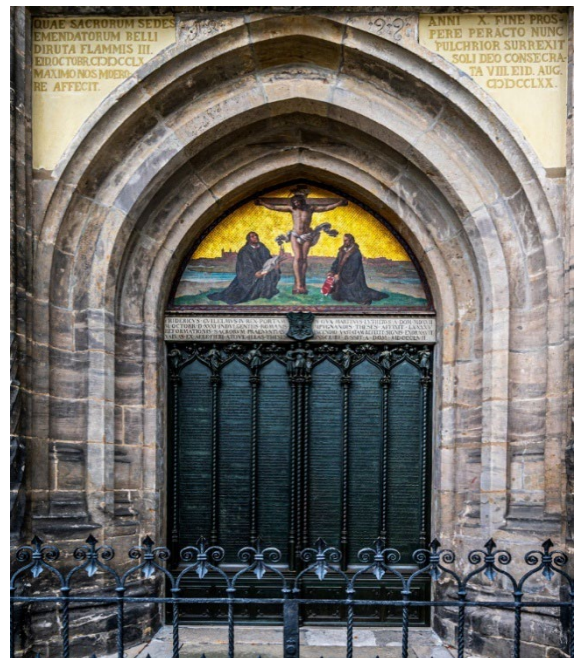
- Focused on Scripture as the sole authority
- Reformed worship and church practices to align strictly with biblical teaching

### John Calvin (Geneva, Switzerland)

- Systematized Reformed theology
- Emphasized God's grace, the work of the Holy Spirit, and ordered church life
- His writings deeply shaped Presbyterian belief and structure

### John Knox (Scotland)

- Brought Calvin's theology to Scotland
- Helped establish **Presbyterian church government** based on elders and councils



# Spread of Presbyterianism



**SWITZERLAND** - With Calvin's influence, it became the center of the Reformation in Europe. Exiles came and studied with Calvin and took his ideas back home.

**FRANCE** - Despite severe persecution, many French people were attracted to the Reformed church. Known as the Huguenots, they established the first Reformed congregation in 1555 and a synod in 1559.

**NETHERLANDS** - A Presbyterian constitution was adopted in 1563.

**SCOTLAND AND IRELAND** - After studying with Calvin, John Knox returned to Scotland in 1559 and established the Presbyterian faith. Soon thereafter, Scottish settlers brought Presbyterianism to Northern Ireland.

**ENGLAND** - Convened by Parliament from 1643 to 1653, the Westminster Assembly produced important documents: a Directory of Worship, a Form of Government, a Confession of Faith, and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms.

## PRESBYTERIANISM IN AMERICA

Presbyterians arrived in North America seeking religious freedom and opportunity. They quickly became influential in:

- Education (founding schools and colleges)
- Church organization and leadership
- Civic and community life

As the church grew, it also experienced **division**, often over theology, revival practices, and social issues such as slavery. Over time, Presbyterians made repeated efforts toward **reunification**, while also facing new disagreements. This history reflects a deep commitment to both **unity in Christ** and **faithful discernment**.

## Coming to America

Renewed religious persecution drove many European Presbyterians to America. There they established new communities and a new life. Major groups of emigrants included English Puritans, French Huguenots; and Dutch, German, Scottish and Irish Presbyterians.

Presbyterian communities were located in New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Virginia, North and South Carolina, and Georgia. Some Presbyterian communities were founded in New England, but most Puritan immigrants in New England became Congregationalists.

In the mid to late 1600s, the first permanent Presbyterian churches were established on Long Island. In 1683, the Rev. Francis Makemie traveled from Ireland to Maryland, where he established a church at Rehoboth. He later organized churches throughout the colonies, founding an intercongregational system of government by elders. The first Presbytery was formed in 1706 in Philadelphia and it became the Synod of Philadelphia in 1716.



## PRESBYTERIAN POLITY

The word *Presbyterian* comes from the Greek word **πρεσβύτερος** (*presbuteros*), meaning *elder*.

### THE POLITY OF THE CHURCH

*Mission*  
is the  
**WHAT**

*Polity*  
is the  
**HOW**

The *polity*, or *form of government*, of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) springs from its theology. The polity is the means whereby the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) organizes itself to carry out the mandate of mission from Christ. If *mission* is the *what*, *polity* is the *how*.

Our *polity* is subject to Scripture. Our polity is understood as God's gift. Our polity is *a shared understanding* of:

- How we are going to live together,
- How we will make decisions,
- How we will be accountable to one another, and
- How we will act together to do God's work.

Presbyterians believe:

- Leadership is **shared**, not centered in one person
- Elders are elected from among the people
- Authority is exercised through **councils**, not individuals
- The Holy Spirit works through prayerful discernment in community

This form of church life is known as **Presbyterian polity**.

### ORDERED MINISTRIES OF THE CHURCH

The Presbyterian Church recognizes three ordered ministries:

#### Deacons

- Ministry of compassion, service, and care
- Focus on the needs of those who are vulnerable or in distress

#### Ruling Elders

- Elected by the congregation
- Share responsibility for spiritual leadership and governance
- Discern the faithfulness and direction of the church

#### Teaching Elders (Pastors)

- Ministers of Word and Sacrament
- Preach, teach, provide pastoral care, and equip the church for ministry
- Share leadership with ruling elders



Presbyterians believe that **how the church is organized reflects what it believes about God and humanity.**

Polity exists to:

- Encourage accountability
- Protect against misuse of power
- Support shared leadership
- Serve the mission of Christ

Structure is understood not as bureaucracy, but as a **gift that helps the church live faithfully together.** Presbyterians believe that **leadership in the Church is shared,** not concentrated in a single individual. This conviction grows out of Scripture and reflects trust in the Holy Spirit's work through the community.

Key principles of Presbyterian polity:

- Authority is exercised **together,** through prayerful discernment
- Leaders are **elected by the people** they serve
- Decisions are made in councils, not by individuals
- Accountability is essential to faithful leadership

Presbyterian polity is a **representative democracy** rooted in theology, not merely efficiency.

## **COUNCILS OF THE CHURCH**

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is governed through **four councils,** each serving the mission of Christ at a different level:

### **Session**

- Governing council of the local congregation
- Oversees worship, mission, education, and pastoral care
- Guides the congregation to become a community of faith, hope, love, and witness

### **Presbytery**

- Governs and supports congregations within a geographic region
- Oversees pastors and congregational health
- Provides guidance, accountability, and shared mission

### **Synod**

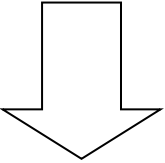
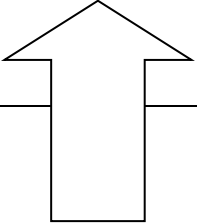
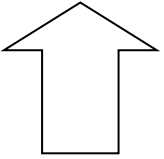
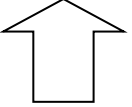
- Regional council serving multiple presbyteries
- Supports presbyteries and provides broader perspective

### **General Assembly**

- National council of the church
- Discerns matters of theology, mission, governance, and public witness
- Expresses the unity of the whole church



### ALTERNATIVE FORMS OF CHURCH POLITY

<b>EPISCOPAL</b>	<b>REPRESENTATIVE</b>	<b>CONGREGATIONAL</b>
Authority comes from the top  	Authority chosen by the people and given to a representative body who are accountable to the larger church.	Authority remains in the congregation itself.  
<b>Pope...</b> <b>Cardinals...</b> <b>Bishops...</b> <b>Priests...</b> <b>People...</b>		<b>Congregation</b>
Leadership is chosen from the top  <i>Catholic, Episcopal, Methodist, Lutheran, etc...</i>	<b>Session (Elders)</b>   <b>Congregation</b>	Each church is autonomous. Leaders are chosen by the congregation and are accountable only to them.
	<i>Presbyterian and other Reformed Churches</i>	<i>Baptist, Independents</i>

## THE CONSTITUTION OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (U.S.A.)

Presbyterians order their life together through a shared Constitution, which has **two parts**:

### The Book of Confessions – Part 1

- Articulates what Presbyterians believe
- Contains creeds, confessions, catechisms, and statements of faith
- Reflects the church’s response to God’s grace in specific times and places

### The Book of Order – Part 2

- Describes how the church lives and governs itself
- Provides structure for worship, leadership, and discipline

Together, these documents hold belief and practice in faithful balance.

## THE BOOK OF CONFESSIONS

The Book of Confessions exists because the church is sometimes called to speak clearly about its faith.

Key ideas:

- Confessions arise during times of controversy or crisis
- They help guide interpretation of Scripture
- They summarize the Christian tradition
- They equip the church for proclamation and witness

Presbyterian confessions are described as **subordinate standards** — authoritative, yet always subject to Scripture and the lordship of Jesus Christ.

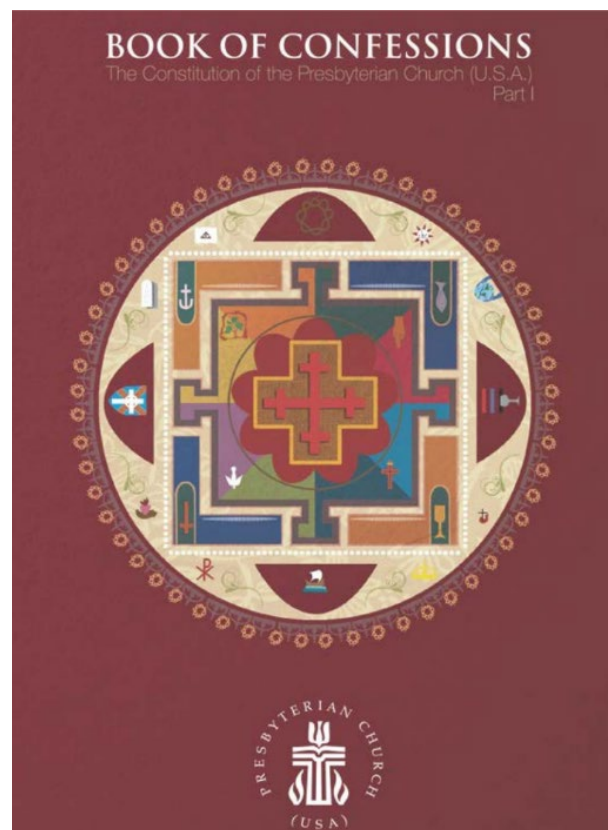
At the heart of every confession is the earliest Christian declaration: *Jesus is Lord*. This reminds Presbyterians that faith is not merely intellectual agreement, but **trust, allegiance, and commitment** to Christ. Christians confess not simply *what* they believe, but *in whom* they believe.

## TYPES OF CONFESSIONAL DOCUMENTS

The Book of Confessions includes several forms of theological expression:

- **Creeds** – short statements of belief, often used in worship
- **Confessions** – longer theological statements
- **Catechisms** – question-and-answer teaching tools
- **Declarations and Statements of Faith** – responses to specific historical moments

Together, they form a theological library that helps the church remain rooted and responsive.



The Book of Confessions contains the following:

### FROM THE EARLY CHURCH

1. The Apostles' Creed
2. The Nicene Creed

### FROM THE REFORMATION

3. The Scots Confession, 1560
4. The Heidelberg Catechism
5. The Second Helvetic Confession
6. The Westminster Confession
7. The Westminster Larger Catechism
8. The Westminster Smaller Catechism

### FROM THE MODERN ERA

9. The Barmen Declaration
10. The Confession of 1967
11. The Confession of Belhar
12. A Brief Statement of Faith

### THE BOOK OF ORDER

Presbyterians believe that faith is not only confessed but also **lived out in community**. The Book of Order exists to help the church live faithfully, fairly, and with accountability.

The Book of Order is organized into four major sections:

- **Foundations of Presbyterian Polity**
- **Form of Government**
- **Directory for Worship**
- **Church Discipline**

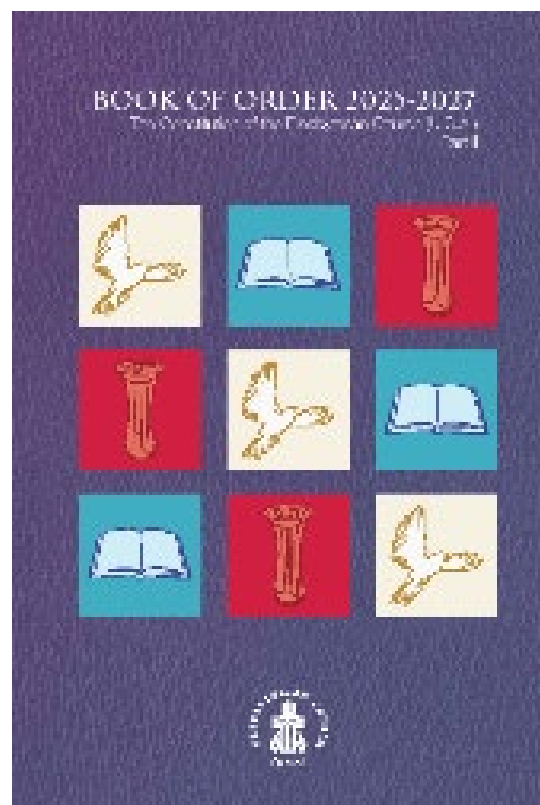
Together, these sections guide how Presbyterians worship, govern, and care for one another.

### BOOK OF ORDER SECTION 1 – Foundations of Presbyterian Polity

The Foundations of Presbyterian Polity articulate the theological convictions that shape Presbyterian life. They remind the church that:

- The mission of the church comes from God
- The church belongs to Jesus Christ
- Scripture bears authoritative witness to God's Word
- Confessions help guide faithful interpretation

Church order flows from theology, not from convenience or tradition alone.



## **BOOK OF ORDER SECTION 2 – Form of Government**

The Form of Government provides a framework for how the church is structured at every level. It addresses:

- Membership and its meaning
- Ordered ministries (deacons, elders, ministers)
- Councils of the church
- Relationships between church and civil authority

This structure allows the church to focus its energy on mission rather than confusion.

## **BOOK OF ORDER SECTION 3 – Directory for Worship**

Presbyterians believe worship is central to the life of faith. The Directory for Worship provides **theological guidance** rather than a rigid script.

Key principles include:

- Worship gives glory to the triune God
- Worship is shaped by Scripture
- Worship is a communal act
- Worship balances tradition and contextual expression

This allows for diversity in worship while maintaining theological integrity.

## **BOOK OF ORDER SECTION 4 – Church Discipline**

Church discipline exists not to punish, but to:

- Preserve the integrity of the church
- Protect those who have been harmed
- Correct wrongdoing
- Restore relationships where possible

Presbyterians understand discipline as an expression of **pastoral care, justice, and reconciliation**.

## WHAT WE BELIEVE

A Brief Statement of Faith (1983) was adopted as part of a reunion in the Presbyterian Church. It expresses core Christian convictions in accessible, poetic language. It begins with belonging and ends with praise.

The statement is organized around the Trinity:

- **God the Father**
- **God the Son**
- **God the Holy Spirit**

### **Belonging to God**

The statement opens with a central affirmation: *In life and in death we belong to God.*

This sets the tone for Presbyterian faith. Faith is not simply belief, but trust and belonging rooted in God's grace, love, and presence.

### **Jesus Christ: Fully Human and Fully Divine**

The statement centers on Jesus Christ as the heart of God's saving work. It emphasizes:

- Jesus' ministry of healing, teaching, and inclusion
- His suffering and crucifixion
- His resurrection and victory over sin and death

Jesus reveals both God's love and God's justice.

### **God the Father: Creation and Covenant**

God is confessed as Creator, who makes all people in God's image and calls humanity into community. The statement is honest about human sin and brokenness, while also affirming God's enduring faithfulness through covenant, liberation, and mercy.

### **God the Holy Spirit: Life and Renewal**

The Holy Spirit is described as the giver and renewer of life. The Spirit:

- Justifies by grace through faith
- Frees people to love God and neighbor
- Binds believers together in the Church
- Works through Scripture, preaching, baptism, and the Lord's Supper

The Spirit equips the church for ministry and witness.

### **Faith Lived in the World**

The statement emphasizes that faith is lived publicly. The Spirit gives courage to:

- Pray without ceasing
- Bear witness to Christ
- Challenge injustice and idolatry
- Work for justice, freedom, and peace

Christian faith shapes engagement with the world.

## A BRIEF STATEMENT OF FAITH

In life and in death we belong to God. Through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit, we trust in the one triune God, the Holy One of Israel, whom alone we worship and serve.

We trust in Jesus Christ, fully human, fully God. Jesus proclaimed the reign of God: preaching good news to the poor and release to the captives, teaching by word and deed and blessing the children, healing the sick and binding up the brokenhearted, eating with outcasts, forgiving sinners, and calling all to repent and believe the gospel. Unjustly condemned for blasphemy and sedition, Jesus was crucified, suffering the depths of human pain and giving his life for the sins of the world. God raised this Jesus from the dead, vindicating his sinless life, breaking the power of sin and evil, delivering us from death to life eternal.

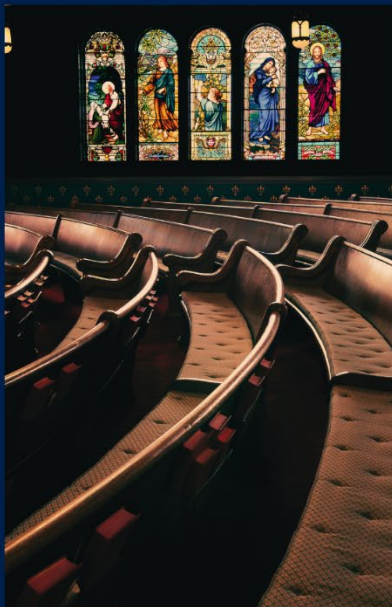
We trust in God, whom Jesus called Abba, Father. In sovereign love God created the world good and makes everyone equally in God's image, male and female, of every race and people, to live as one community. But we rebel against God; we hide from our Creator. Ignoring God's commandments, we violate the image of God in others and ourselves, accept lies as truth, exploit neighbor and nature, and threaten death to the planet entrusted to our care. We deserve God's condemnation. Yet God acts with justice and mercy to redeem creation. In everlasting love, the God of Abraham and Sarah chose a covenant people to bless all families of the earth. Hearing their cry, God delivered the children of Israel from the house of bondage. Loving us still, God makes us heirs with Christ of the covenant. Like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child, like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home, God is faithful still.

We trust in God the Holy Spirit everywhere the giver and renewer of life. The Spirit justifies us by grace through faith, sets us free to accept ourselves and to love God and neighbor, and binds us together with all believers in the one body of Christ, the Church. The same Spirit who inspired the prophets and apostles rules our faith and life in Christ through Scripture, engages us through the Word proclaimed, claims us in the waters of baptism, feeds us with the bread of life and the cup of salvation, and calls women and men to all ministries of the Church. In a broken and fearful world the Spirit gives us courage to pray without ceasing, to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior, to unmask idolatries in Church and culture, to hear the voices of peoples long silenced, and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace.

In gratitude to God, empowered by the Spirit, we strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks and to live holy and joyful lives, even as we watch for God's new heaven and new earth, praying, "Come, Lord Jesus!" With believers in every time and place, we rejoice that nothing in life or in death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. Amen.

## WORSHIP AND THE SACRAMENTS



### WHAT IS WORSHIP?

When we think of worship as a verb...



- To worship is to **LOVE** the one who first loved us.
- To worship is to **BLESS** the one from whom all blessings flow.
- To worship is to **SHOW** our gratitude for God's amazing grace.
- To worship is to **GIVE** your life to the giver of life.

Presbyterians understand worship as the heartbeat of the Christian life. Worship forms identity. It shapes belief. It sends believers into daily discipleship. Worship is both God's action and the church's response.

Worship is understood as both **a noun** and **a verb**:

- A gathering of God's people; an event
- An active offering of praise, prayer, and service; something we do

Biblically, worship is closely connected to service and the work of the people.

That is what "liturgy" is. It comes from the Greek word **leitourgia** (*leitourgia*); a compound word made up of two other Greek words: people (*laos*) and work (*ergon*). Literally, the word means "work of the people,"

In biblical Hebrew, the word **עָבַד** (*'abad*) can be translated as both "worship" and "serve." Therefore, for Christians, worship and service are two sides of the same coin. Worship means to lead a life that honors the Giver of life and makes a positive difference in the world.

Presbyterian worship follows a rhythm:

- God acts first with grace
- The people respond with gratitude

This rhythm shapes prayer, preaching, sacraments, and sending.

## SACRAMENTS AT THE HEART OF WORSHIP

Presbyterians understand sacraments as **central acts of worship**, not optional traditions. Through them, God meets the church with grace in tangible, embodied ways.

# THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (USA) RECOGNIZES TWO SACRAMENTS



## BAPTISM

Baptism is a ritual washing. The word baptism comes from the Greek word βαπτίζω, which means "to immerse" and is connected to the Jewish tradition of מקוה (mikveh), a Jewish ritual bath used for traditional rites of purification.



## LORD'S SUPPER

The Lord's Supper is a ritual meal of bread and wine traditionally served during a service of worship that re-enacts and represents the final meal Jesus shared with his disciples according to the gospels.

These sacraments are grounded in Scripture and rooted in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ.

### What Is a Sacrament?

A sacrament is a **sacred act** and a **holy mystery**. While we may not fully understand how God works through sacraments, we trust that God's **invisible grace is made visible** through ordinary elements.

Sacraments:

- Are gifts of God, not human achievements
- Engage the senses (water, bread, wine)
- Invite trust rather than explanation

### Sacraments and Scripture

In the Presbyterian tradition, a practice is recognized as a sacrament when it meets two criteria:

- It was **instituted by Christ**
- It was **commended by Christ**

Baptism and the Lord's Supper meet these criteria and are consistently practiced by the church as means of grace.

## BAPTISM

Baptism is a sign of **God's initiative and promise**. It marks a person's entry into the body of Christ and the beginning of a lifelong journey of discipleship.

Key affirmations about baptism:

- Baptism is **received only once**
- Baptism is **God's action before our response**
- Baptism signifies **forgiveness, new life, and belonging**

Infant baptism and believer's baptism both witness to God's grace, offered before and beyond human understanding.

## THE LORD'S SUPPER

The Lord's Supper is a communal meal of remembrance, thanksgiving, and hope. At the table, the church remembers Jesus' life, death, and resurrection and anticipates God's promised future.

Key affirmations about the Lord's Supper:

- Celebrated regularly
- Nourishes and sustains faith
- Strengthens community
- Assures believers of Christ's ongoing presence

## Sacraments as Means of Grace

Presbyterians describe sacraments as **means of grace** — ways God communicates love, forgiveness, and promise.

Sacraments are:

- God's gracious action
- Met with human gratitude and faith
- Signs and seals of God's covenant

They shape identity and call believers into faithful service.

## The Real Presence of Christ

Presbyterians affirm the **real presence of Christ** in the sacraments, while acknowledging the mystery of how Christ is present. Rather than defining the mechanics, Presbyterians trust the promise that:

- God meets us at font and table
- Christ renews and strengthens faith
- The Spirit binds the community together

## BECOMING A MEMBER

Membership in the Church of Jesus Christ is a **gift, a joy, and a responsibility**. It reflects God's call to live out faith in community.

Membership is:

- Rooted in baptism
- Lived in worship and service
- Sustained through shared commitment

To join the church is to say yes to participating in Christ's mission through this congregation.

## WELCOME AND OPENNESS

The Presbyterian Church affirms that all persons who trust in God's grace in Jesus Christ are welcome. Hospitality is central to the gospel. No one is excluded from membership for reasons unrelated to profession of faith. Participation is encouraged long before membership, and curiosity is always welcome.

People may enter membership in several ways:

- **Public profession of faith** (and baptism, if not already baptized)
- **Transfer of membership** from another Christian church
- **Reaffirmation of faith** after time away

Each path involves conversation, discernment, and commitment.

## THE MINISTRY OF MEMBERS

Every member is called into ministry. Faithful membership includes:

- Worshiping regularly
- Growing in faith through study and prayer
- Supporting the church with time, talents, and resources
- Serving others in Christ's name

Membership in the church is a call to active participation rather than passive affiliation. Every member is called to ministry, offering their gifts, skills, talents, and interests in service to God, the Christian community, and the world.

Presbyterian membership understands discipleship as shaping all of life. Members are called to:

- Seek justice and peace
- Care for creation
- Live responsibly in family, work, and community
- Bear witness to Christ through daily life

Faith is lived publicly and relationally.

## CATEGORIES OF MEMBERSHIP

The Presbyterian Church recognizes several categories of membership. These categories allow flexibility while honoring connection.

- **Baptized Members** – Persons who have received baptism but not yet made a public profession of faith.
- **Active Members** – Persons who have professed faith, been received into membership, and participate in worship, mission, and governance.

- **Affiliate Members** – Persons temporarily associated with a congregation while retaining membership elsewhere.

### **The Role of the Session**

The Session is the governing body of the local congregation. It has responsibility for:

- Receiving and welcoming new members
- Providing pastoral oversight
- Guiding the church's life and mission

Meeting with the Session is a conversation, not an examination.

### **Reception in Worship**

New members are welcomed during worship because faith is lived in community.

During the service, individuals publicly affirm their trust in Jesus Christ and their commitment to the life of the church. The congregation responds by promising love, support, and shared ministry.

## COVENANTING TOGETHER

Rejoicing in my baptism and celebrating God's grace and gifts in my life, I resolve to minister within the community of this church as a servant of Jesus Christ as follows:

### **I will support the witness of this church by:**

- aiming to live a godly life
- striving to grow in my faith
- seeking to exhibit the kingdom of God to the world
- joining in worship regularly
- giving regularly

### **I will serve the ministry of this church by:**

- using my time and talents in joyful service to others
- seeking to discover and nurture my gifts and talents
- participating in a ministry and fulfilling the duties of my ministry to the best of my ability
- participating in training as I am given opportunity

### **I will share in the growth of this church by:**

- warmly welcoming those who visit
- praying for our community and our congregation—it's members, ministry, and staff
- proclaiming the good news of God's love through Jesus Christ in word and deed
- inviting those without a church home into our ministry

### **I will build-up the community of this church by:**

- seeking to connect with others
- acting in love toward others
- holding others in high regard
- working cooperatively with others
- serving in partnership with others
- supporting and affirming the gifts and ministries of others

## ABOUT FINANCIAL STEWARDSHIP

By Mark Allan Powell

### GIVING TO GOD

I recommend that we give money to the church in two different ways. The goal of this approach is to move us out of the guilt-driven, manipulative realm in which conversations about financial stewardship can so easily become mired, and move us into a gospel orientation where we can feel good about our giving and about how we are using our resources for God.

I discuss these two ways of giving under the headings *pledges* and *offerings*. These terms are familiar to many churchgoers, but I use them to describe an approach that is different from common practice. In many churches today, members are asked to make pledges regarding the total amount of money that they plan to give to the church in a year; I suggest that pledges be limited to one particular type of giving only: proportionate support for the congregational budget. Further, in most churches today, members fulfill their pledges by contributing to the offerings that are collected at worship services; I suggest that offering be devoted to something else: sacrificial giving that goes beyond what we contribute as reasonable proportionate support. Perhaps it will seem that I am complicating matters unnecessarily, but there are good reasons for setting the matter up this way and, in truth, the program I am suggesting is not very complicated at all.

### Pledges

I recommend that church members make pledges to their church that correspond to the first type of giving discussed above: we should *pledge to support* our congregation with contributions that represent our proportionate responsibility for its budgeted expenses. In doing this, we are not being generous or making a sacrifice; we are being responsible and fulfilling a basic commitment to the life and mission of the community of which we are a part.

Our pledge will probably not represent everything that we give to the church – it might represent only a small portion of what we give. Nevertheless, we need to fulfill that pledge with contributions that are regular and dependable. Payment of our pledge should not be affected by vacation schedules or other anomalies. The church needs to be able to depend on receiving this money from us regardless of whether we are in town on any given week or whether we overspent our budget on Christmas shopping.

Commitment to paying our pledge should also have nothing to do with whether we are angry with the pastor or disappointed with the congregation or frustrated by bureaucratic maneuvers of the national denomination. We do not give this money in order to influence church policies or politics, nor do we give it because we approve of everything the church does. We give it because we are part of the church and we *want* to belong to this fractious and flawed family of God that is so beloved of Christ.

Ideally, I do not think that it is best to pay our pledge by putting money in the offering that is collected at worship services. There are better ways to pay it – better for practical reasons and also for religious ones. In our modern world, the absolute best way to pay a pledge may be through automatic fund transfers, so that the church receives whatever we have pledged directly into its bank account at the same time every month. The money is simply subtracted from our own bank account or, sometimes, taken right out of our paycheck – a modern equivalent for giving the “first fruits” of our produce (Proverbs 3:9). Many churches and financial institutions are now set up to allow for such a procedure. For those that are not, though, the next best way to pay our pledge is probably by writing checks on a regular basis and mailing them to the church in the same way we would mail checks to cover other charges that we are responsible for paying each month.

### Offerings

Offerings should correspond to the cheerful sacrifices that are made by those who gladly renounce their possessions and give their money away in ways that go beyond what would constitute reasonable

proportionate support for the congregational budget. This is an act of pure worship, an expression of deep faith, and a sure discipline for spiritual growth.

If we are paying a pledge to the church in the manner described above (an important *if*), then our offerings can be somewhat sporadic, spontaneous, unpredictable, and reflective of our varying levels of enthusiasm and areas of commitment. They can be spirit-led: we are free to follow our conscience and our intuition in deciding how much to give and when to give it. There is great joy in such giving, for we are not merely fulfilling a basic responsibility but, in truth, are opening our hearts to the goodness of God. It is in such giving that we become generous people. It is in such giving that we become grateful people. Indeed, it is in such giving that we become godly people.

The invitation to renunciation, to sacrificial giving, is an invitation to let the goodness of God take hold of us. God gives generously and graciously to all for one reason only – because God is good! And when we give to others in ways that go beyond what would be reasonably expected of us – when we give our money away for what seems like “no reason at all” – we do so because the goodness of God has taken hold of us. Life holds no greater thrill than this. And there is no better place for such cheerful sacrifices to be presented than within the context of a Sunday morning worship service, as part of what we call “the offering.”

I need to say, however, that our practice of sacrificial giving need not be limited to gifts made to the church. There are many other charities and good causes to which we might want to make donations and, if we are paying our pledges – providing our proportionate share of support for our church’s budget – then we may feel free to answer Jesus’ call to renunciation by giving to programs other than the church. If I feel led to give that money to a college or to a missionary society or to a health organization, or to a homeless person on the street, that is entirely appropriate.

Having said this, however, I can think of three reasons why it is often a good idea to devote at least some of the money that we view as sacrificial giving (beyond our pledge) to the local congregation:

First, the worship service itself is more meaningful if we put *something* in the offering plate. It is always good to participate in the offering taken up at any worship service by putting something in the plate that is to be present to God.

Second, just because we are doing our part in contributing proportionately to the church does not mean the budget will be met. There will be people in the congregation who do not give as they ought. There may be some with good intentions who due to unforeseen circumstances are not able to give as they wished. And there may be others who are ignorant of the church’s needs or who are spiritually immature or just too stubborn to do what they should do. It doesn’t matter: we are called to bear each other’s burdens (Galatians 6:2). Some of us need to make up for those who don’t give as they ought by giving *more* than our share – this is a simple reality.

And, third, there have probably been times in our lives when we were not contributing proportionately to the church. From a historical perspective, then, it seems entirely appropriate that we give more than our share now. I know that there have been times in my life when my participation in the life of a church community was sustained by the benevolence of others. Now, perhaps, it is my turn to provide such benevolence for someone else.

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