



Exploring  
Membership

# Faith of Our Lives

## *A Brief History of Presbyterianism*

By Janet Moneymaker

**T**hey were people like you and me: a Gentile listening to Paul teach in Ephesus; a German miner's son posting his opinions on a 16th century bulletin board; American Presbyterians wrestling with their faith in the turbulent 1960s and expressing their affirmation in a new confession. At this point in history we call them Founders of the Church. In their own time, the only thing they had in common was asking themselves the same question: what does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus Christ in MY world?

A Christian realizes that God's truth is constant and enduring, while society demands that Christianity be relevant to the world — and sometimes conformed to the world. The history of the Presbyterian Church is the story of Christians struggling with that tension. It is the story of people trying to discover, "What does it mean to say that 'Jesus Christ is Lord' in 100 AD, 1536, or 2010?"

### **In the beginning, there was one church... more or less**

Early Christianity can be seen through the three cultures prevalent in Israel at that time:

- the Jewish culture which gave Christianity its roots;
- the Greeks, who contributed a great deal of philosophical thought (and the language of the New Testament); and
- the Romans, whose powerful and orderly system of government enabled peace, communication, and relatively easy travel within its vast empire.

Most of the world (meaning the Roman Empire) considered Christianity to be a minor, if sometimes irritating cult. That opinion changed dramatically when the Emperor Constantine accepted Christianity in 312 AD. Ironically, official sanction introduced a whole new set of problems. The church was exposed to both existing and invading "barbarian" hordes that didn't have the sophisticated backgrounds of Jewish, Greek and Roman cultures, and therefore had little in common with Christianity. As the Roman Empire began to crumble in the fifth century, the Christian Church became one of the few sources of leadership, guidance, and authority for a society on the brink of anarchy. By the end of the 700s, the bishop of Rome was acknowledged as head of western Christendom, and began to assume both spiritual and secular power.<sup>1</sup>

Demands for reform and renovation were heard practically from the day of Pentecost. As long as new Christians came from a Jewish background, as were the original

apostles, they shared a common heritage. Once the Disciples began baptizing Gentiles, representing dozens of cultures scattered throughout the Roman Empire, a multitude of alien ideas and beliefs crept into Christian teaching. As early as the second century, church leaders realized they needed to address the misconceptions within Christianity. The Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed were composed by early theologians to define key issues (like the facts about Jesus' life) and to clarify some key terms like "faith."

By the 1500s, the calls for renovation started a religious revolution. Although many people contributed to the forces that became the Protestant Reformation, two men are particularly important to us as Presbyterians: Martin Luther and John Calvin.

Martin Luther (1483–1546) unintentionally provided the spark that set off the Protestant Reformation. He was the son of a German miner, but chose not to follow his father's profession and instead became a monk. In his studies of the Bible, Luther came to agree with the apostle Paul that salvation depended simply on faith in Christ (Romans 1:17), not on good works, performance of ceremonies, and payments of fees to priests and churches.

Payment of fees to the priests and to the church sounds odd to us now, but during Luther's time, the pope arranged for the sale of indulgences to fund the building of St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome. Indulgences were supposed to deliver the purchaser from certain punishments after death. The custom, which began in the eleventh century, had become a huge moneymaking venture by the 1500s, financing various costly papal projects.

In 1517, Luther attacked the whole indulgence business by nailing 95 "theses" or propositions to the door of the Wittenberg church. In academic circles, the Wittenberg church door was commonly used as a kind of bulletin board. To Luther's surprise, his 95 Theses created an enormous sensation. He had merely intended to reform certain practices of the Roman Catholic Church. Instead, this event marked the beginning of the upheaval known as the Protestant Reformation.

Luther believed that scripture was the sole authoritative source of Christian beliefs, and that people needed to read Scripture for themselves, not rely solely on the interpretation of priests and monks.<sup>2</sup> He wanted everyone to have access to scripture, so he translated the entire Bible into German. Finally, lay people could not only read the Bible, they could see for themselves whether the new Protes-

<sup>1</sup> There were influential bishops in Jerusalem, Antioch, Alexandria and Rome. The bishop of Rome was designated as "pope," the Latin word for "father" because of Rome's position of power in the Roman Empire as well as the Petrine theory. This doctrine claimed the bishops of Rome inherited the authority of Peter, the first bishop of Rome, whom Christ designated as his vicar on earth (Matthew 16:18). Eastern Christians have never accepted the ecclesiastical supremacy of the pope.

<sup>2</sup> At this time, the Roman Catholic Church believed that only clergy should read the Bible and interpret it for the people.

tant teachings were consistent with the Bible. Luther conceived of the Church as the whole body of believers in Christ, not any other specific institution. He abolished the hierarchy of pope, cardinals and bishops, proclaiming the priesthood of all believers. Only the two of the seven sacraments practiced by the Roman Catholic Church were retained: baptism and the Eucharist — the only two mentioned in the Bible. Although Protestantism divided into Lutheranism and the Reformed Tradition fairly early in its history, Luther's influence can still be seen in our modern Presbyterian beliefs.

John Calvin (1509–1564) gave Presbyterianism its distinctive character. He was born in France, where he studied the humanities, theology and law. Suddenly, at the age of twenty-four, Calvin became convinced of the truth of Reformation ideas, probably as a result of reading Luther.

Calvin's zealous Protestant ideas soon brought him into conflict with both the government and the Roman Catholic authorities in France, and he was forced to flee to Basel, Switzerland. Later, he went to Geneva, which had become a haven for Protestant thought. In his theological masterpiece, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, as well as other works, Calvin stressed the sovereignty of God and submission to His will. Later, he wrote and established the liturgical pattern still used by many Presbyterian churches today. Calvin believed if people had proper religious instruction, morals would follow. He also stated that it was essential to provide a steady, systematic exposure to scripture. His emphasis on education and personal Bible study is still a part of Presbyterianism today.

While in Geneva, Calvin developed one of his most distinctive achievements—Presbyterian church government. He established four types of church officers: pastors, teachers, elders and deacons. The clergy were to be on equal footing, without superior bishops over them. Elders were elected by lay people, and shared responsibilities with the clergy in church government.

## On the Road to America

The religious issue became the chief concern throughout Europe within a few decades of Luther's nailing his 95 theses on the Wittenberg church door. The new Protestant doctrines spread quickly with the help of the recently invented printing presses. These doctrines affected the spiritual arena as well as the secular: political, economic and social.

The Calvinist tradition, from which Presbyterianism originated, was one of the most international of the Reformation movements. It penetrated both Western and Eastern Europe, and played an important part in the founding of the United States. Although part of the Calvinist doctrine did insist on the Bible as final authority, Calvinist theology also included some very democratic ideas, such as the

choosing of church positions by the members of the congregation (instead of the Catholic hierarchy).

In our modern democratic society, it's sometimes hard to remember that in Calvin's day, most European countries were ruled by hereditary monarchies. Chief ministers were often churchmen. Any ideas of people's choice and authority over a king and church were greatly alarming both to the king and the Catholic church. It was difficult to tell where religious doctrine stopped and politics began. Most of the countries that embraced the Reformation were also embracing a form of people's choice, which refuted the Divine Right of Kings. Each country and event contributed to the evolution of Presbyterianism, as we know it today.

Almost from the beginning, Switzerland became the center of the Reformation in Europe. Although nominally part of the Holy Roman Empire, it was in reality an independent confederation of semiautonomous states that embraced the new Protestant doctrine. Exiles from other countries came to Switzerland to live, as Calvin did, to study in safety. In turn, more exiles came to study with theologians, such as Huldreich Zwingli, Heinrich Bullinger, and John Calvin, then carried the Reformed tradition back home.<sup>3</sup>

In France, the Reformed tradition grew steadily through the 1550s, guided by John Calvin in Geneva. There was enmity from the beginning between the French Protestants, called Huguenots, and the combined forces of the Roman Catholic Church and royal authorities. Soon, this enmity flared into open, bloody persecution of the Huguenots and civil war across France that was to last for nearly a hundred years. The majority of Huguenots who weren't killed in this persecution immigrated to other countries.

In the Netherlands, the religious controversy was intertwined with the struggle for political independence. The Reformed faith spread quickly through the seven northern provinces, which were part of the Hapsburg Empire and ruled by the Spanish king. Conflict again led to persecution, a real reign of terror that turned into a really nasty decades-long fight. Under the leadership of William of Orange, the northern provinces formed the Union of Utrecht in 1581 from which sprang modern Holland.<sup>4</sup> The country became a haven for French Huguenots, English Puritans, and Scottish Covenanters, and was a powerful influence in spreading the Reformed faith.

In a rather strange sense, the Reformed faith in England was strengthened when the Catholic Mary Tudor came to the throne in 1553. Bloody Mary's deadly devotion to Catholicism forced many Protestants to flee the country. These refugees came under the influence of the Reformed tradition in Geneva—and John Calvin. They were collectively called "Puritans" until the 1680s (when theological differences would split them into Presbyterians and Con-

<sup>3</sup> In 1551 Heinrich Bullinger wrote "The Second Helvetic Confession". Originally penned as a statement of his personal faith, Bullinger published it in 1566 to support the Reformers in Heidelberg. Although less well known than Luther, Bullinger had a significant influence on three generations of Protestants, including the English Puritans who fled to America.

The heated disputes among Protestants in Heidelberg also prompted two other theologians, Caspar Olevianus and Zacharias Ursinus, to write "The Heidelberg Catechism." Both this document and the Second Helvetic Confession are part of our Book of Confessions.

<sup>4</sup> The southern provinces remained under Spanish rule, and later became Belgium.

gregationalists). In 1643, The Puritan Parliament called together the Westminster Assembly to reform the Church of England on more Presbyterian lines. The resulting doctrinal statement, the famous “Westminster Confession” was the sole doctrinal standard of Presbyterianism in America from 1648 to 1967. This Confession, and the Westminster Assembly in general, had little effect on England. Both the monarchy and the Anglican Church of England were restored to power in 1660, and neither wanted to encourage the dangerous democratic ideas of the Puritans. The resulting persecution drove many Puritans — including the Presbyterian conservative branch — to immigrate to America.

For more than three hundred years, Scotland has been the chief center of Presbyterianism in Europe, and the chief figure of Scottish Presbyterianism is John Knox. After studying under John Calvin in Geneva, Knox returned to Scotland in 1559 and established the Presbyterian faith, at least temporarily, as the state church. In only four days, six men, all named John, drew up the Scots Confession, a statement of faith designed to unify the nation both politically and ecclesiastically.<sup>5</sup> (Remember, separation of church and state is an American concept!) For the next 130 years, Scottish Presbyterians struggled to maintain their church and faith, although the various Stuart monarchs struggled mightily to convert them to either Catholicism or Anglicanism. Many Reformed Scots, called Covenanters, chose to immigrate to America. Only when William of Orange and his English wife, Mary Stuart, were invited to take the thrones of England and Scotland, was the Scottish Parliament able to make Presbyterianism once again the official religion of Scotland.

Scottish settlers brought Presbyterianism to Ireland when the English government invited them to take over confiscated land in Ulster at the turn of the seventeenth century. This did not please the Irish, who suddenly became second-class citizens in their own country. In 1641, the resentful Irish Catholics massacred many Scottish and English Protestants. A few decades later, Charles II of England attempted to convert both Presbyterians and Catholics to the Anglican Church of England by force. Obviously, nobody was getting along with anyone. Both rounds of persecution forced many Scotch-Irish to emigrate to—you guessed it—America.

## Everything done decently and in order

Let’s break into this historical narration with a quick summary of the basic structure of Presbyterian government, or the next few paragraphs will be meaningless. The word “Presbyterian” comes from the Greek word for “elder”: presbuteros. It refers to the system in early church history of choosing leaders from among its wisest members. A Presbyterian church like University Presbyterian Church is a representative democracy governed by elders elected from and by the congregation—UPC members. These elders and the ordained ministers serve on the local church governing body, called Session. The members of Session

also serve in Presbytery, the governing body that oversees a group of local churches. UPC is part of the Seattle Presbytery, composed of 61 Presbyterian churches. Representatives from each Presbytery are elected to oversee several presbyteries in a governing body called the Synod. The Seattle Presbytery is one of seven presbyteries in the Synod of Alaska-Northwest. This synod is one of sixteen that make up the General Assembly, a national governing body made up of equal number of lay people and clergy chosen by the presbyteries. UPC is part of the General Assembly called Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). This structure is the legacy of John Knox and the Church of Scotland. Just keep remembering, “democracy,” and “everything decently and in order.”

As previously discussed, religious persecution drove many Presbyterians to America. Early US settlement was dominated by immigrants committed to the Reformed tradition: English Puritans, French Huguenots, and Dutch, German, Scottish and Irish Presbyterians. The majority of Presbyterian communities were located in New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Virginia, North and South Carolina, and Georgia.

In 1683, The Reverend Francis Makemie arrived in Maryland from Ireland. While he is commonly known as the “Father of American Presbyterianism,” he should also be remembered as the “Father of Everything Done Decently and in Order,” because he organized Presbyterian churches throughout the colonies, founded an inter-congregational system of government by elders and formed the first American presbytery.

Rev. Makemie’s first presbytery of 1706 is important to us for two reasons. First, it united two differing and often conflicting heritages: English Puritan Presbyterianism and the Presbyterianism of the Scottish and Scotch-Irish. Secondly, this presbytery was organized from the ground up, rather than the top down, as was Presbyterianism in Scotland. In Scotland, Parliament adopted Presbyterianism as the official state church—the Church of Scotland. There, the General Assembly implemented everything. Here in America, there was no state church. There were occasional efforts towards a state church, but no denomination dominated enough to win that honor. The general feeling seemed to be if MY denomination won’t be the state church, then we shan’t have a state church. In America, we were strengthening the idea of more power to the presbyteries, which were rather like states. Keep that thought in mind, by the way—it becomes more important with each passing decade.

In the 1740s, there was a period of religious renewal that we call “The Great Awakening.” On one hand, Presbyterians were pleased to see so many people commit their lives to Christ. On the other hand, it brought out the conservatives and liberals and divided them from top to bottom. The conservatives believed revivalism was too emotional and had a potential for disorder. They were appalled that other denominations sent out ministers who had little education. Education has always been essential to a faith

<sup>5</sup> The six men were John Knox, John Douglas, John Hillock, John Rowe, John Spottiswoode and John Winram. Scots really like the name “John.”

If you are interested in a really delicious period of history, read up on the relationship (or lack thereof) between John Knox and the two queen Marys, Mary of Guise and her daughter, Mary, Queen of Scots.

that insisted on personal study of scripture. While the importance of lay ministry did take root, the conservatives insisted ministers needed to be educated in a traditional fashion, either in Europe or New England. The liberals felt this conservative outlook engendered spiritual deadness. They said, “If you feel that strongly about ministerial education, you should build more schools.” The conservative response was to found the College of New Jersey in 1746, which we know today as Princeton University.

By the 1770s, America was rumbling over taxation without representation, English tea monopolies, as well as issues of freedom and the pursuit of happiness. Presbyterians were almost unanimous in their support of the American Revolution. First of all, they saw it as a way to keep the English Parliament from decreeing the Church of England as the official “state church”—a very real fear from a Parliament in which they were not represented. Secondly, Presbyterian theology has never mixed well with the arbitrary nature of a monarchical government. Presbyterians saw a parallel between their covenant theology and the social contract espoused by the leaders of the Revolution. The covenant theology holds that God has entered into a covenant with fallen human beings, offering them salvation in Christ upon condition of their faith. The social contract theory says man enters into a contract with a king to rule over them. If the king violated the terms of the contract and became a tyrant, he might be restrained or even deposed. Thirdly—remember all those Presbyterians who fled France, England, Scotland and Ireland to avoid the persecution of the King? Trust us, they had long memories.

Now that the American church was absolved from all allegiance to the British, American Presbyterians needed their own governing body. They organized the first General Assembly in 1788, naming it, “The Presbyterian Church in the United States of America.” There’s faith for you. The Revolutionary War didn’t officially end until 1789. It may be too much to claim that the constitution and the American system of government are based on our Presbyterian system, but it certainly had a strong influence both in leadership and structure.

## There’s nothing civil about a Civil War

The 19th Century was a time of division, reconciliation, and growth. The Second Great Awakening, plus rapid westward migration, stimulated missionary zeal. Believe it nor not, the Presbyterians had no structure for mission work. None of the Protestant denominations did. So, they began to work together. In 1801, The Presbyterian Church joined with the Congregational Church in a “Plan of Union” to provide ministers to the settlers moving west of the Appalachians. Congregations could be connected with both denominations at the same time and be served by pastors of either. The Plan worked for a while, but theological and philosophical disputes arose not only between Presbyterian and Congregationalists, but among Presbyterians as well. The Plan was dissolved in 1837, and such ecumenical cooperation was not seen again until our day.

That same year, the Presbyterian Church in the United

States of America split along conservative and liberal lines. The Old School (conservatives) wanted rigid adherence to the Westminster Standard and those high educational standards for ministers. After all, hadn’t the denomination founded eight theological seminaries in the last twenty-eight years? The New School (liberals) wanted more interdenominational cooperation especially in missions, even at the expense of theological niceties. One important outgrowth of the ministerial education versus the needs of the westward movement was the decision to ordain elders. This, by the way, was a strictly American innovation. The Old School wanted to stay neutral on the slavery issue. The New School supported abolition. Both retained the same name for their General Assemblies. If you think that is confusing, there’s more.

The next splits were geographical. When the New School General Assembly passed resolutions condemning slavery in 1857, its Southern members withdrew and formed the United Synod of the Presbyterian Church. When the Old School General Assembly passed similar resolutions in 1861, its Southern members withdrew and formed the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America. There were now four separate branches of the Presbyterian Church.

The differences among the four General Assemblies interweave governing structure issues of mission boards, presbyteries and congregations, social reform issues, the role of elders, spiritual issues, and four years of civil war. It’s no wonder that even though the Civil War ended in 1865, the scars that formed on the Presbyterian Church lasted another hundred years. The two southern General Assemblies merged in 1864. They were invited to merge with the Northern Old School General Assembly in 1865—on the condition that both ministers and members confess their sin of secession and renounce their error of considering slavery a divinely sanctioned institution—sort of a Presbyterian Iron Clad Oath. The offer was declined.

Five years later, the Old School and the New Schools of the North joined to become the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America. The Southern General Assembly was called the Presbyterian Church in the US. And that’s the way it remained for many years.

## Forward to the 21st century

In the 20th century, Presbyterians continue to work with the question of what it means to say, “Jesus Christ is Lord.” They have struggled with issues within the church, including reunification, social responsibilities, and reinterpreting what we believe to each generation. They have struggled with issues from the world around us that affect us whether we want them to or not, including five wars, incredible social changes, amazing technological breakthroughs, and new philosophies.

Various mergers (and new splits) have reduced the number of Presbyterian General Assemblies to three.<sup>6</sup> These unions represent healing of concerns, doctrine, and outlook that date back to the 1800s. One of the most important steps in the movement toward a united Presbyterian

<sup>6</sup> For a more complete history of these General Assemblies and the various mergers, read Loetscher’s book.

church took place in 1983 when the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America and the Presbyterian Church in the United States merged to become Presbyterian Church (USA). This reunion brought together three million members in 13,225 churches — including University Presbyterian Church.

The Reformed tradition believes the Christian church has a responsibility to society as a whole as well as to individuals. This social message marched along with the events and concerns of the 20th century. The ecumenical movement that began in the 1930s saw Presbyterians working with other denominations in the area of world missions, international and domestic social problems, and differing and common theological issues. Presbyterians helped to form the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA (1950) and the World Council of Churches (1948). Within the Presbyterian church, women could become deacons after 1915, elders by 1930, and ordained as ministers of Word and Sacrament by 1956. Segregation was banned in the 1960s. Outreach ministries have continued to expand, meeting changing social problems. Here at UPC, for example, the Missions Department created an Urban Missions arm to work with issues such as the homeless, street teens and racial reconciliation.

As part of the Reformed tradition, the Presbyterian church is constantly reforming itself. At various points in history, Christians have responded to the need to reinter-

pret their beliefs to the current generations by composing the various creeds and confessions discussed earlier. This century a group of German church leaders took a stand against Nazi-lead German nationalism and idolatry of the German state. The result was the Barmen Declaration of 1934. The turbulent 1960s challenged Christians to restate their faith. Presbyterians met that challenge with the Confession of 1967, which addresses the role of the church in today's world. That same year, General Assembly adopted a Book of Confessions that includes creeds from the early church and the Reformation, the Westminster Confessions and Catechisms, the Theological Declaration of Barmen, and the confession of 1967.

When the two General Assemblies reunited in 1983 to form the Presbyterian Church (USA), members felt the need to articulate and restate Presbyterians' common identity. The result was "A Brief Statement of Faith," which was added to the Book of Confessions.

Faith doesn't operate in a vacuum, and neither can the church. What does it mean to you to say, "Jesus Christ is Lord?"

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# What Do We Believe?

## *A Brief Study of Presbyterian Beliefs*

Many of us at University Presbyterian Church did not grow up Presbyterian. Some of us didn't even grow up Christian—we accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior at a later point in our lives. Our reasons for choosing to join UPC are probably as varied as we are.

You have now spent several weeks in the New Members process exploring what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ as lived out in the congregation called University Presbyterian Church. But what is this thing called a “Presbyterian”?

### How Do You Spell Presbyterian?

On the most basic level, Presbyterians are a group of people who follow a Western Christian, Reformed Protestant, evangelical tradition. But what does that mean?

We are from a *Western Christian* tradition in that we come from the Roman Catholic rather than the Orthodox heritage. In brief, this means the tradition that looked to Rome for leadership beginning in the 11th century, rather than Constantinople.

We are from the *middle tradition* in Protestantism, which took the name, “Reformed.” Other Protestant traditions include Lutheranism, Anglicanism, and Anabaptist (which spawned a number of additional denominations including Covenant, Methodist and Congregational).

Key aspects of the Reformed tradition include God's initiative in:

- **Salvation.** God's activities in bringing us into a right relationship with God and with one another through Jesus Christ.
- **Election.** God's choosing of a people to enjoy the benefits of salvation and to carry out God's purposes in the world.
- **Union with Christ.** A believer's union with Jesus Christ is on the basis of faith by the power of the Holy Spirit.<sup>1</sup>

The Reformed tradition also encompasses a form of church government that stresses the active, representa-

tional leadership of both ministers and church members. This is in contrast to other forms of church government, such as congregationalism (in which authority rests with the local congregation, and where each congregation is autonomous and independent),<sup>2</sup> and the Episcopal (in which authority resides with bishops who oversee a diocese).<sup>3</sup>

We are *evangelical* in that we believe we are “called to tell the good news of salvation by the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ as the only Savior and Lord...[that] the Church is called to be Christ's faithful evangelist ... [and that] the Church is called to undertake this mission even at the risk of losing its life.”<sup>4</sup>

Basically, that's how you define Presbyterian. But what does UPC require of you to become a member? First of all, you must be baptized. (We'll explore the theology of baptism and infant versus adult baptism later in this essay.) Second, you must be able to answer affirmatively to four questions of faith. You'll find these four questions on the white New Member Information Card. You will be asked these questions during the worship service when you join the church:

- Do you trust Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?
- Do you intend to be his disciple, to obey his word and to show his love?
- Will you be a faithful member of this congregation by participating in responsible Christian education, worship, service, and financial support?
- Will you seek the fellowship of the Church wherever you may be?

Those are the basics. Now we'll look at how these questions fit into what Presbyterians believe.

### We believe....

First and foremost, Presbyterians are Christians, and we share many beliefs in common with other Christian denominations. Remember — the Book of Acts tells of a time when the whole Christian church was one! We believe that...

<sup>1</sup> McKim, Donald K. *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*. Louisville, 1996, p. 234.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p. 58.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p. 91.

<sup>4</sup> Book of Order, G-3.03–3.04.

<sup>5</sup> Book of Order, G-3.101.

- **God is creator of the universe.** He “created the heavens and the earth and made human beings in God’s image, charging them to care for all that lives.”<sup>5</sup>
- **Christ is the incarnation of God on earth**—fully human and fully God.
- **The Holy Spirit** is the presence of God in the world and in the believer.
- **The Trinity is God as three persons**, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
- **The church** is a universal company of Christ’s followers.
- **The forgiveness of sin** is made possible by the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus.
- **Life everlasting** and the resurrection of the body is ours because Jesus rose from the dead on the third day.
- **The Bible** is the inspired word of God.

Secondly, Presbyterians are Protestants. We share beliefs in common with other denominations that split from the Roman Catholic Church in the sixteenth century as well as those that were founded later.

Protestants believe in justification by faith. We are justified, or brought into a right relationship with God through grace. This does not happen by our own effort, but through God’s favor revealed in Jesus Christ, in the death of Christ on the cross. Because of God’s love for us, Jesus Christ took sin upon himself and became the full and final sacrifice for the sins of the world.<sup>6</sup>

Protestants also believe in the authority of scripture. Scripture is the written revelation of God and always points through the Holy Spirit, to the living revelation of God in Christ. The purpose of scripture is to bring persons to salvation and guide them in living a life of faith.

Presbyterians express the faith of the Reformed tradition. Central to this tradition is the affirmation of the majesty, holiness, and providence of God who creates, sustains, rules and redeems the world in the freedom of sovereign righteousness and love.<sup>7</sup>

Presbyterians have two main sources for inspiration and guidance in their faith. The first is the Bible. The second is a set of eleven creeds and confessions of faith compiled in *The Book of Confessions*.<sup>8</sup> Some of these creeds, such as The Nicene and Apostles’ Creeds, are held by a majority

of Christians. Others are held only by Protestant faiths, and still others only by Presbyterians. In these statements the church declares to its members and to the world who and what it is, what it believes, and what it resolves to do. While these confessional statements are subordinate to the authority of Scripture (i.e. we do not consider them “inspired”), they are touchstones or models of faith. They are also standards, which the church is able to refine. We affirm “the church reformed, always reforming” according to the Word of God and the call of the Spirit. In these eleven creeds and confessions, we state that we believe in:

- **The sovereignty of God.** We know the actions of God are intentional and directed toward the accomplishment of his purposes in his creation. God also uses human means in history to accomplish his purposes, yet such means do not involve coercion. We are still responsible for our decisions and actions. Scripture calls us to both concepts.
- **Election.** Before we ever said yes to God, God said yes to us. The central point is that the initiative belongs to God, and we respond to Him. We cannot glory in the fact that we say yes to his salvation. Election is the Reformed way of saying “grace alone.”
- **Covenant.** God has made a covenant, or promise, with his people. This has always been a covenant of grace. God’s promise is that he will be our God and we will be his people if we believe and have faith.
- **Stewardship.** Stewardship is an attitude toward all of creation. We are creatures given the mandate as stewards, or servants, to care for all God has created. Grace motivates us to live in gratitude. *Redemption* calls us to respond in thankfulness by caring for all that God has given us. As we recognize that all life, faith, love, and every other gift comes from God, so we recognize our responsibility to render back a portion of what has been given us in these areas. This “rendering back” might include time, talent and treasures. Stewardship is a spiritual matter, not a synonym for raising money.
- **Sin of Idolatry.** “The Problem” according to Reformed theology, is not atheism, it’s idolatry. Calvin argued that knowledge of God is implanted in every human heart, but is suppressed by human sin. People actively choose not to acknowledge God as their creator, and instead create idols — defined as anything we create that we give our ultimate allegiance to.

<sup>6</sup> Ethan Raath, “Grace.” Presbyterian Survey (Presbyterians Today), May 1996.

<sup>7</sup> Book of Order, G-2.0500.

<sup>8</sup> The Nicene Creed, The Apostles’ Creed, The Scots Confession, The Heidelberg Catechism, The Second Helvetic Confession, The Westminster Confession of Faith, The Shorter Catechism, The Larger Catechism, The Theological Declaration of Barmen, The Confession of 1967, A Brief Statement of Faith. Copies of The Book of Confessions are available in UPC’s library and on the Harvest Logos booktable.

- **Obedience.** We are to be obedient to the Word of God, which directs us to work for justice in the transformation of society. All our life is a response to all God, father, son, and holy spirit, has done and is doing.

Some of the most commonly asked questions about what Presbyterians believe are about the following topics:

- **The Trinity.** We believe God exists in the Trinity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.
- **Christ.** Christ is the Son of God, the Revealer of God and the Savior of humanity.
- **Heaven.** The souls of the faithful are reunited with God in a warm and loving relationship for eternity.
- **Hell.** Hell is separation from God and may exist now as well as in the hereafter.
- **The Virgin Birth.** Presbyterians believe that Jesus' birth was miraculous.
- **Mary.** Mary is honored as the mother of Jesus, the special person chosen to bear the Son of God.
- **Resurrection.** The resurrection of the body refers to the reuniting of the spiritual body and physical body.
- **Confession.** This is voluntary and made directly to God, although it may be made in the presence of another believer.
- **Salvation.** God grants the gift of grace (unmerited favor), which enables us to gain the faith necessary for salvation. We are saved by grace rather than by good deeds, correct beliefs, or human ceremonies. We do not earn salvation—it is unearnable. It can only be accepted with thanksgiving and joy.<sup>9</sup>
- **The cross.** The empty cross symbolizes the risen Christ who opened the Kingdom of Heaven.
- **The sacredness of marriage.** Marriage is a covenant through which a man and a woman are called to live out together before God their lives of discipleship.<sup>10</sup> Presbyterians try to curb divorce by encouraging young people to prepare seriously for marriage.
- **Change.** Presbyterians admit different understandings of the Confession of Faith. This is because they believe the church should be open to the reform of its standards of doctrine.<sup>11</sup>

- **Parenthood.** Parenthood is a gift, but there is nothing in the church's teaching that discourages intelligent, unselfish family planning.
- **Education.** Presbyterians place a great deal of stress on education, both for the ministry and for the laity.
- **The “only” church.** No Christian church has exclusive possession of the church government authorized by Christ.
- **The sacraments.** Presbyterians recognize two sacraments as described in the Bible: baptism and communion. The Book of Order describes sacraments as “the signs of the real presence and power of Christ in the Church, symbols of God's action. Through the Sacraments, God seals believers in redemption, renews their identity as the people of God, and marks them for service.”<sup>12</sup>

## The Sacraments

The sacrament of baptism unites us with Jesus Christ and makes us members of God's family, the church. It is God's gift of grace and also His summons to respond to that grace. It is a call to repentance, faithfulness and discipleship. Presbyterians believe baptism is a public confession, not a private one. It is a statement of faith made in the presence of others. Baptism does not guarantee you access to heaven. Presbyterians believe sacraments in themselves do not save people or even help us to have more faith. Unbaptized people are not denied salvation.

The baptism of infants and children witnesses to the truth that God's love claims people before they are able to respond in faith.<sup>13</sup> When an infant is baptized, it is God's activity—God acts to make us his own, pledging himself to us. Furthermore, the parents and the church family commit themselves to nurture the child in faith. The baptism of adults is a public profession of faith. It is an act of obedience. Presbyterians believe baptism is received only once, regardless of where it was performed. The effect of baptism is not tied to the moment when it is administered, for it signifies the beginning of life in Christ, not its completion. To be rebaptized as an adult when you have been baptized as an infant is like saying God didn't get it right the first time. Nor do you need to be rebaptized because you were initially baptized in another denomination. Presbyterians believe that we are part of one body of Christian believers, and recognize and accept all baptism with water in the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.<sup>14</sup>

The sacrament of communion is also called The Lord's Supper, Holy Communion or The Eucharist (from the Greek word for “grateful” or “thanksgiving”). It is a time to renew faith and strengthen participants for the duties and privileges of Christian service. In communion, the bread and wine represent the sacrificial body and blood

<sup>9</sup> Angell, p. 11.

<sup>10</sup> Book of Order, W-4.9001.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., G-2.0200.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., W-1.3033.2.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., W-2.3008.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., W-2.3010.

<sup>15</sup> Weeks, p. 59.

of Christ and recall the last meal shared with the apostles. Together they symbolize the new covenant between God and all people. Through the presence of the Holy Spirit, the elements enable us to give thanks, remember and anticipate God's redemptive work on our behalf. In the Presbyterian church, all baptized faithful are welcome to partake in communion. While communion is a sacrament, it possesses no magic, and we are not saved by taking it.<sup>15</sup>

## Come and See: Jesus' Call to Discipleship

What does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus Christ in our world? It's the question we want every UPC member to ask himself or herself. It means accepting Jesus' invitation to follow him as he leads us into an ever-deepening experience of the abundant life. As Presbyterians, we believe all church members are called to ministry. That doesn't mean we are all called to attend seminary and become ordained pastors. It means we actively participate in the daily life of the church, according to our talents. It means we learn to pastor each other. The ministry is the membership of the church, not a special group set apart from the rest.

As Presbyterians, we are also called upon to actively participate in worship. Presbyterians follow a stated — but not strict — liturgy in their church services. Formal church services may vary from one congregation to another, but are always designed to include the entire congregation in worship. The purpose is to draw upon the Biblical tradition of God's people assembling for praise, prayer and instruction, then going out to share the joys and responsibilities of an informed discipleship.<sup>16</sup>

## Why Membership?

As disciples of Jesus and members of his body we come together for the work of worship, fellowship, and mission. None of us can live out our commitment to Christ in isolation. First of all, Christ himself did not cut off his Disciples from the world, but rather placed them right smack in the middle of the world to carry out his purpose of a new life for the world.<sup>17</sup> Secondly, we need one another. By becoming a member of a particular congregation you declare your willingness to put down roots. You make a covenant with a particular part of God's family and commit to live out the life of discipleship in a particular place. You accept Christ's call to be involved responsibly in the ministry of his Church. Such involvement includes:

- **proclaiming the good news**
- **taking part in the common life and worship** of a particular church,

- **praying and studying Scripture** and the faith of the Christian Church,
- **supporting the work of the church** through the giving of money, time, and talents,
- **participating in the governing responsibilities** of the church,
- **demonstrating a new quality of life** within and through the church,
- **responding to God's activity in the world** through service to others,
- **living responsibly** in the personal, family, vocational, political, cultural, and social relationships of life.
- **working in the world** for peace, justice, freedom, and human fulfillment.<sup>18</sup>

Are you ready for the abundant life? Come and see.

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<sup>16</sup> Angell, p. 7.

<sup>17</sup> Gray and Tucker, p. 14. Original quote from "Church Membership and Discipline" (Atlanta: Office of the Stated Clerk, Presbyterian Church in the United States, 1979), p. 11.

<sup>18</sup> Book of Order G-5.0102.

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