

Why Presbyterians are Like That

Like most Christians throughout history, Presbyterians affirm the faith articulated in the Nicene Creed and Apostles Creed. We believe that

- God created the heavens and the earth,
- Jesus had a human mother like all of us,
 - that he was uniquely related to God in a way that is not true about the rest of us,
 - that he lived an exemplary life,
 - was unjustly betrayed and executed,
 - was as dead as we will all be,
 - was resurrected on Easter, and
 - remains our living Lord.

Presbyterians are distinguished by the particular ways we live out our faith in Jesus. We don't claim to be the only Christians who emphasize the elements of Christian faith discussed below, but we do believe that these common emphases and themes mark us as distinctive in the Christian family. **Presbyterians are the way we are because Presbyterians are Christians who believe...**

1. Studying the Bible prayerfully and together helps us figure out which things matter more than other things.

Presbyterians take the Bible seriously. We don't worship the Bible, but we worship the God we meet in the Bible. Our experience as Presbyterians has led us to conclude that the best way for us to live faithfully with God and with each other is to

- regularly study Scripture in community (not just by ourselves),
- pray for God's guidance as we do that, and
- listen to each other as we share thoughts and insights.

Presbyterians don't always agree. We don't all emphasize the same passages in the same way. We don't believe that any single verse, taken out of context, necessarily contains the full authority of the Bible. But we affirm that the Bible is always the best place to go to begin our conversations about which things matter more than other things.

2. Grace happens.

Presbyterians emphasize the grace of God. “Grace” is love that is unconditional, unearned, and undeserved. There are certainly Christians—and Christian congregations—who speak of Christian faith in terms of what individuals must do in order to receive forgiveness from God and acceptance into the church. While there are some passages in the Bible that suggest that individuals have to act in certain ways in order to get God to love them, Presbyterians believe that the message of the Bible as a whole is that God has always loved us, will always love us, and loves us right now. We believe God’s grace is present in our lives whether or not we ever ask for, deserve, or earn that love. Presbyterians reject any suggestion that God’s love has prerequisites. We believe God’s love precedes any action on our part. We believe we are safe (saved) because of what God does, not what we do.

3. God’s grace invites response.

The idea that human salvation is purely the result of God’s grace—with no required activity on the part of individuals—leads some to wonder why our behavior makes any difference if God’s gonna love and save us no matter what we do. While Presbyterians don’t believe we have to do anything to get God to love us, we also believe God’s unconditional love constantly invites and empowers us to respond gratefully to God’s grace by worshiping God and striving to be instruments of God’s love in the lives of others. We believe that the life and ministry of Jesus guides us as we respond to God’s grace. We absolutely believe that God cares what we do—how we act— but we think our responsibilities, as individuals and as a faith community, are exactly that: “response-abilities.” We have important choices to make about how we respond to the love that is and will always be present in our lives. Individually and together, Presbyterians make grateful response to God’s grace by worshiping God, studying Scripture together, and caring for all of God’s children and all God’s creation.

4. God gave us brains and expects us to use them.

Presbyterians are wordy, literate people. We trace our origins to the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century. The events, theological discussions, and disputes of the Reformation led Presbyterians and other Protestants to affirm the Bible as the highest authority for all Christians (as opposed to pronouncements and judgments of church councils or individual leaders). That emphasis means that all Christians (not just clergy) have the duty, right, and ability to read and study the Bible. Those concerns have led Presbyterians to value and promote literacy and eventually to support education in general. Presbyterians believe there’s nothing we shouldn’t ask about, learn about, and talk about. Presbyterians believe God created, loves, and sustains all things. So we believe there is nothing in our lives and in our world that is beyond the business of individual Christians or the church in general. There’s nothing we shouldn’t think about, learn about, and talk about. We believe that nothing in the Bible ever calls or requires us to pretend that we don’t know things that we actually do know—about science, literature, history, or anything else.

5. We are beloved, gifted, capable, and safe. Already. Right now.

By prayerfully studying Scripture together, Presbyterians have concluded that God has always loved us and will always love us. That means that God loves you—not just everybody, but you in particular. The truest thing about you is that you are a beloved, gifted, capable, and safe child of God right now—just as you are. Presbyterians recognize that God has given gifts to each of us individually and to all of us together as a faith community. We believe we are called to identify, develop, and use those gifts to serve the world. We are confident that we can and should learn more about our world than we currently know. And we are convinced that our status as God’s beloved, gifted, and capable children is never in jeopardy and will never be lost.

6. God calls us to be on the side of the ones who are having the hardest time.

Studying the Bible prayerfully together has led Presbyterians to conclude that the people of God are always called to care for the most vulnerable members of the societies in which we live. From the command to love widows, orphans, and strangers in Deuteronomy 10 to Jesus’ identification with hungry, thirsty, sick, and imprisoned persons in Matthew 25 (and dozens and dozens of other Scripture passages), the Bible teaches that faithful response to God’s love in our lives always involves noticing, actively loving, and supporting others who face personal or communal difficulties.

7. Nobody’s perfect.

Presbyterians talk about sin a lot because the Bible talks about sin a lot. We recognize ourselves, and our world, in the Genesis story in which the first two humans

- deny their dependence on anything beyond themselves (fruit),
- deny their responsibility for their actions (blame),
- separate themselves from each other (fig leaves), and
- separate themselves from God (hiding).

We see denial of dependence, denial of responsibility, separation from each other, and separation from God every day in our individual lives, in our life together, and in our world. We know sin is part of the truth about all of us. We know it’s part of the truth about who we are—individually and corporately. We believe it’s important to acknowledge and remember that. But we also know it’s not the whole truth.

8. There’s more Holy Spirit in a bunch of us than in any single one of us.

As a group, Presbyterians are appropriately confident that we are capable of using the brains God gave us to figure out how to live faithfully together in response to God’s gracious love. But we also realize that we’re all sinners and that no single one of us has all the wisdom, gifts, and insight necessary for us to determine how best to live out our faith in any particular situation. Presbyterians are often deservedly kidded for our hyper organization and obsession with committees. But all of that structure exists to remind us to slow down and listen to each other. At its best, Presbyterian polity and organization enables us to give the whole church access to the gifts that God has given to individuals and communities beyond our particular contexts.

9. God isn't finished.

When Presbyterians study the Bible prayerfully and together, our experience is that we are addressed from beyond ourselves by a living and faithful God who continues to respond to human sin by loving, calling, pursuing, empowering, and inspiring us to live with hope in a world where sin and death are real but Easter is true. That's why many of us go to church every Sunday. It's why we continue to study the Bible together and participate in the ongoing story of God's interaction with the world through Christ and his body the church.

10. God's love is not limited to our particular faith community.

There are places in the Bible that suggest that God's love is limited to certain communities. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah strongly suggest that the people of Israel are superior to other communities with different religions (Ezra 9:1-4 and Neh. 13:23-25). There are verses in the New Testament, especially in the Gospel of John, that suggest that only Christians know God (John 3:16 and 14:6). But study of the entire Bible in an increasingly diverse context has led Presbyterians to hesitate to speak so definitively on God's behalf about persons who use different vocabulary than we do to talk about God. Presbyterians strive to speak humbly about the infinite. We believe the scope of God's love is bigger and more extensive than we are ever able to fully articulate or explain.

