

Religions in America: Presbyterian

Who are the Presbyterians?

Where most of them live: Presbyterian churches are all around the U.S. They are strongest in the East and the South.

How many people are Presbyterian in the U.S.? About 3,500,000.

How long has the Presbyterian church been here? Since the early 1600's.

Presbyterians are well known for: A president in the White House, strong Scottish background, good education.

Names of some Presbyterian groups: the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is the largest with 3,000,000 members. Smaller groups are the Presbyterian Church in America, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, and the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church. Churches with "Reformed" in their name, like the Reformed Church of America, often have beliefs like the Presbyterians.

Where Do Presbyterians Get Their Name?

The word "Presbyterian" is from a Greek word in the Bible, presbuteros. The word means "elder," a pastor or teacher or leader in the church. The Presbyterian church uses the word to describe their church government. A congregation has a teaching elder (the pastor) and ruling elders (who are members). Groups of congregations have a board of elders ruling over them, named presbyteries. Presbyteries are grouped into synods, and each synod has a ruling board of elders. All the synods are grouped into a general synod, with another ruling board of elders. Because they use elders to rule the whole church, they name themselves the Presbyterian ("Elder") Church.

What Controls Their Teaching?

Historically, Presbyterians believe all their teaching must come from the Bible. Today, many liberal Presbyterians don't use the Bible much.

Presbyterians also believe very strongly that God is sovereign. That means that God is so big and almighty that He rules over everything and He decides everything. At the same time, He is so infinite that He cannot be contained or limited in any way. That affects their teachings about the Lord's Supper. They say because God is infinite, it is impossible for Jesus' body to be with a little piece of bread, or His blood with some wine. (But if God is Almighty, He can make it happen, right?)

Presbyterians also believe in "Covenant Theology." They say God makes agreements with us. He saves us, so now we must do our part of the agreement. We must work hard to obey His law and serve Him. That is God's covenant, or agreement.

Presbyterian's teachings are described in a book named the Westminster Confession. Some Presbyterian churches today don't completely follow that book. Some are becoming very liberal and denying that Jesus is true God, denying that Jesus rose from the dead, denying that God created everything, and so on.

What Do Presbyterians Believe?

Remember John Calvin? Calvin was a man in the church who lived close to the time of Martin Luther, in the early to mid 1500's. Calvin taught about TULIP. No, that doesn't mean he loved flowers. TULIP is a way to summarize his teachings. For many years, Presbyterians followed John Calvin. They still follow some of his teachings today.

- T** Total Depravity. That means we are totally sinful and we can't help ourselves. We are not able to help save ourselves. Does the Bible teach this? Read Ephesians 2:1-2 and Romans 8:6-8.
- U** Unconditional Election (choosing). That means God chooses people to be saved. God doesn't look for something good in us before He chooses us. We don't have anything good for God to see in us! God simply chooses some people to go to heaven because He is full of mercy. Does the Bible teach this? Read Ephesians 1:4-6. Calvin also taught that God chooses people to go to hell. Does the Bible teach that? Read 1 Timothy 2:3-4.
- L** Limited Atonement. "Atonement" means Jesus bringing us back to God, uniting us again with God. Jesus did that because He died on the cross to pay for our sins. Calvin said Jesus' work is limited, meaning He died only for believers. Jesus didn't die to forgive unbelievers. It is true that not all people are saved. But did Jesus die only for some people and not others? What does the Bible say? Read Ephesians 5:25-27 and 2 Corinthians 5:15.
- I** Irresistible Grace. God's grace means His wonderful free gifts, especially His gift of salvation. Calvin taught that when God gives salvation, we can't resist or reject His gift. When God gives salvation, we will believe. If God gives us salvation, it is impossible for us NOT to believe and be saved. What does the Bible say? Read Ephesians 2:8-10 and Acts 7:51.
- P** Perseverance of the Saints. This means God's people will continue saved and can't lose salvation. Read John 10:27-29. Can anything steal us from God? Read Hebrews 10:26-27. Can we take ourselves away from God?

Do Presbyterians Have Sacraments?

Presbyterians do have baptism and the Lord's Supper. They do baptize babies, also. They do believe that God works through those sacraments and that He gives grace. But their official teachings emphasize more God choosing who He will save. That makes the sacraments less important. If you don't know if God chose you or not, the sacrament doesn't mean much.

What Do Lutherans Say?

Many Presbyterian teachings are good. They emphasize that we need a Savior and we can't save ourselves. But they need to understand that Jesus died for all people, not just a few. They need to understand that we live to thank God, not to try to obey all His laws. And Presbyterians today need to go back to the Bible and read God's word.