

# “Can I be a Christian and a Presbyterian?”

## Session Two

### “What Can We Say About The Holy Spirit?”

*We trust in the one triune God, the Holy One of Israel,  
whom alone we worship and serve;  
Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

—“Brief statement of Faith,” lines 5-6, 80

This triune God is the creator of the universe, the savior of the world, who has been revealed as the perfect model of humanity in Jesus Christ and is the ongoing presence and power of God in the world.

#### **Biblical references**

On Pentecost, the seventh Sunday after Easter, Christians commemorate the coming of the Holy Spirit to Jesus’ early followers. But the Bible contains several earlier references to the Spirit as well — for example, in the accounts of Mary’s conception: “... she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 1:18) and “The Holy Spirit will come upon you ...” (Luke 1:35); the accounts of Jesus’ baptism: “... he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him” (Matthew 3:16) and of Jesus sending his disciples out for the first time: “... do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say ... for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you” (Matthew 10:19-20).

Through the Holy Spirit, God empowers us to grow in faith, make more mature decisions and live more faithful lives. The Spirit gives us the will, as Jesus said, to “be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). The Holy Spirit gives believers the authority to accurately interpret the Bible, just as the Spirit enabled the original writers of Scripture to tell truthfully about God, Jesus and everything else we need to know. The Spirit also gives authority to the church to act in God’s name for the good of humanity. The Spirit gives every person a sense of “calling” to a special function in the world, in keeping with God’s providence and Jesus’ summons to “follow him.” Among the “fruits of the spirit” identified by the apostle Paul are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22).

#### **Presbyterian confessions**

The “Westminster Confession of Faith,” a historic Presbyterian document, refers to the Holy Spirit as a source of God’s grace and “the only efficient agent in the application of redemption.” For all humans, the confession says, the Spirit “convicts them of sin, moves them to repentance and persuades and enables them to embrace Jesus Christ by faith.” It further states that God is willing to give the Spirit to all who ask.

The “Brief Statement of Faith” speaks about the Holy Spirit:

**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,**

“Baptism enacts and seals what the Word proclaims: God’s redeeming grace offered to all people. Baptism is at once God’s gift of grace, God’s means of grace, and God’s call to respond to that grace. Through Baptism, Jesus Christ calls us to repentance, faithfulness, and discipleship. Through Baptism, the Holy Spirit gives the Church its identity and commissions the Church for service in the world” (W-3.0402).

“The water used for Baptism should be from a local source, and may be applied with the hand, by pouring, or through immersion” (W-3.0407).

“God’s faithfulness to us is sure, even when human faithfulness to God is not. God’s grace is sufficient; therefore Baptism is not repeated. There are many times in worship, however, when we may remember the gift of our baptism and acknowledge the grace of God continually at work in us. These may include: profession of faith; when participating in another’s baptism; when joining or leaving a church; at an ordination, installation, or commissioning; and at each celebration of the Lord’s Supper” (W-3.0402).

“As there is one body, there is one Baptism. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) recognizes all baptisms by other Christian churches that are administered with water and performed in the name of the triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” (W-3.0402).

**Lord’s Supper.** “The Lord’s Supper (or Eucharist) is the sign and seal of our communion with the crucified and risen Lord. Jesus shared meals with his followers throughout his earthly life and ministry—common suppers, miraculous feasts, and the covenant commemorations of the people of God. Jesus spoke of himself as the bread of life, and the true vine, in whom we are branches. On the night before his death, Jesus shared bread and wine with his disciples. He spoke of the bread and wine as his body and blood, signs of the new covenant and told the disciples to remember him by keeping this feast. On the day of his resurrection, Jesus made himself known to his disciples in the breaking of the bread. The disciples continued to devote themselves to the apostles’ teaching, fellowship, prayers, and the common meal. As Paul wrote, when we share the bread and cup in Jesus’ name, ‘we who are many are one body’ (1 Cor. 10:17)” (W-3.0409).

“The Lord’s Supper enacts and seals what the Word proclaims: God’s sustaining grace offered to all people. The Lord’s Supper is at once God’s gift of grace, God’s means of grace, and God’s call to respond to that grace. Through the Lord’s Supper, Jesus Christ nourishes us in righteousness, faithfulness, and discipleship. Through the Lord’s Supper, the Holy Spirit renews the Church in its identity and sends the Church to mission in the world” (W-3.0409).

“When we gather at the Lord’s Supper the Spirit draws us into Christ’s presence and unites with the Church in every time and place. We join with all the faithful in heaven and on earth in offering thanksgiving to the triune God. We reaffirm the promises of our baptism and recommit ourselves to love and serve God, one another, and our neighbors in the world” (W-3.0409).

“The opportunity to eat and drink with Christ is not a right bestowed upon the worthy, but a privilege given to the undeserving who come in faith, repentance, and love. All who come to the table are offered the bread and cup, regardless of their age or understanding. If some of those who come have not yet been baptized, an invitation to baptismal preparation and Baptism should be graciously extended.

Worshippers prepare themselves to celebrate the Lord’s Supper by putting their trust in Christ, confessing their sin, and seeking reconciliation with God and one another. Even those who doubt may come to the table in order to be assured of God’s love and grace in Jesus Christ” (W-3.0409).

“The Lord’s Supper shall be celebrated as a regular part of the Service for the Lord’s Day, preceded by the proclamation of the Word, in the gathering of the people of God. When local circumstances call for the Lord’s Supper to be celebrated less frequently, the session may approve other schedules for celebration, in no case less than quarterly. If the Lord’s Supper is celebrated less frequently than on each Lord’s Day, public notice is to be given at least one week in advance so that all may prepare to receive the Sacrament” (W-3.0409).

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!

## “Where Did These Presbyterian Come From?”

The Christian church’s birth was at Pentecost, as described in the Book of Acts. At Pentecost the Jewish disciples of Jesus proclaimed the Gospel to people of many cultures and languages. By the middle of the first century, the church was made up of Jewish and Gentile believers who worshiped God, in the name of Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit. The church began to grow rapidly throughout the region we now know as the Middle East, even through hardship and persecution from the Roman Empire.

During the fourth century, after more than 300 years of persecution under various Roman emperors, the church became established as a political as well as a spiritual power under the **Emperor Constantine**. The church became strong in the east (Greek-speaking) and the west (Latin-speaking) regions of the Roman Empire and beyond. Among the greats of the east was Athanasius and among the greats of the west was Augustine. Eventually the western portions of Europe came under the religious and political authority of the Roman Catholic Church. Eastern Europe and parts of Asia came under the authority of the Eastern Orthodox Church.

During the Middle Ages a number of mystics emerged, including Julian of Norwich, who have shaped the spirituality of many Christians.

In western Europe, the authority of the Roman Catholic Church remained largely unquestioned until the Renaissance in the 15th century. The invention of the printing press in Germany around 1440 made it possible for common people to have access to printed materials including the Bible. This, in turn, enabled many to discover religious thinkers who had begun to question the authority of the Roman Catholic Church. One such figure, Martin Luther, a German priest and professor, started the movement known as the Protestant Reformation when he posted a list of 95 grievances against the Roman Catholic Church on a church door in Wittenberg, Germany, in 1517. Some 20 years later, a French/Swiss theologian, John Calvin, further refined the reformers’ new way of thinking about the nature of God and God’s relationship with humanity in what came to be known as Reformed theology. John Knox, a Scotsman who studied with Calvin in Geneva, Switzerland, took Calvin’s teachings back to Scotland. Other Reformed communities developed in England, Holland and France. The Presbyterian church traces its ancestry back primarily to Scotland and England.

Presbyterians have featured prominently in United States history. The Rev. Francis Makemie, who arrived in the United States from Ireland in 1683, helped to organize the first American Presbytery at Philadelphia in 1706. In 1726, the Rev. William Tennent founded a ministerial “**log college**” in Pennsylvania. Twenty years later, the College of New Jersey (now known as Princeton University) was established. Other Presbyterian ministers, such as the Rev. Jonathan Edwards and the Rev. Gilbert Tennent, were driving forces in the so-called “Great Awakening,” a revivalist movement in the early 18th century. One of the signers of the Declaration of Independence, the Rev. John Witherspoon, was a Presbyterian minister and the president of Princeton University from 1768-1793.

In the early years of the 19th century, the movement known as the Second Great Awakening began around the celebration of Presbyterian communion services. This movement spread rapidly and gave birth to the camp meeting movement in the United States. Presbyterians became more of a town church in this period as small towns began to grow in the previously rural areas.

In the early 20th century the Presbyterian vision for church and ministry was crystalized in the Six Great Ends of the Church: the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind; the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God; the maintenance of divine worship; the preservation of the truth; the promotion of social righteousness; and the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world.

Presbyterian denominations in the United States have split and parts have reunited several times starting in the 18th

century. Currently the largest Presbyterian denomination is the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), which has its national offices in Louisville, Ky. It was formed in 1983 as a result of reunion between the Presbyterian Church in the U.S. (PCUS), the so-called “southern branch,” and the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. (UPCUSA), the so-called “northern branch.” This reunion has been a bright spot of reconciliation and unity in the history of American Presbyterianism. Other Presbyterian churches in the United States include the Presbyterian Church in America, the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, ECO (A Covenant Order of Presbyterians), and the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is governed by its Constitution, the *Book of Order* and *The Book of Confessions*. The Confession of Belhar, a confession growing out of apartheid-era South Africa, was added the *The Book of Confessions* at the 222nd General Assembly (2016) in Portland, Oregon.

## “What Is the Presbyterian System of Church Government?”

A major contributor to Reformed theology was John Calvin, who converted from Roman Catholicism after training for the priesthood and in the law. In exile in Geneva, Switzerland, Calvin developed the Presbyterian pattern of church government, which vests governing authority primarily in elected members known as elders. The word Presbyterian comes from the Greek word for elder.

Elders are chosen by the people. Together with ministers of the Word and Sacrament, they exercise leadership, government, and discipline and have responsibilities for the life of a particular church as well as the church at large, including ecumenical relationships. They shall serve faithfully as members of the session (*Book of Order*, G-10.0102). When elected as commissioners to higher governing bodies, elders participate and vote with the same authority as ministers of the Word and Sacrament, and they are eligible for any office (*Book of Order*, G-6.0302).

The body of elders elected to govern a particular congregation is called a session. They are elected by the congregation and in one sense are representatives of the other members of the congregation. On the other hand, their primary charge is to seek to discover and represent the will of Christ as they govern. Presbyterian elders are both elected and ordained. Through ordination they are officially set apart for service. They retain their ordination beyond their term in office. Ministers who serve the congregation are also part of the session. The session is the smallest, most local governing body. The other governing bodies are presbyteries, which are composed of several churches; synods, which are composed of several presbyteries; and the General Assembly, which represents the entire denomination. Elders and ministers who serve on these governing bodies are also called presbyters. Presbyteries and synods are also collectively referred to as mid councils.

## “What Are ‘Sacraments?’”

Denominations often differ over what they recognize as sacraments. Some recognize as many as seven sacraments, others have no sacraments in the life of the church. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has two sacraments, baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

“The first Christians, following Jesus, took three primary elements of life—water, bread, and wine—as symbols of God’s self-offering to us and our offering of ourselves to God. We have come to call them Sacraments: signs of God’s gracious action and our grateful response. Through the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, God claims us as people of the covenant and nourishes us as members of Christ’s body; in turn, we pledge our loyalty to Christ and present our bodies as a living sacrifice of praise” (W-1.0204).

**Baptism.** “Baptism is the sign and seal of our incorporation into Jesus Christ. In his own baptism, Jesus identified himself with sinners—yet God claimed him as a beloved Son and sent the Holy Spirit to anoint him for service. In his ministry, Jesus offered the gift of living water. Through the baptism of his suffering and death, Jesus set us free from the power of sin forever. After he rose from the dead, Jesus commissioned his followers to go and make disciples, baptizing them and teaching them to obey his commands. The disciples were empowered by the outpouring of the Spirit to continue Jesus’ mission and ministry, inviting others to join this new way of life in Christ. As Paul wrote, through the gift of Baptism we are ‘dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus’ (Rom. 6:11)” (W-3.0402).