

SO HOW DO YOU SPELL PRESBYTERIAN?

(Sermon title is taken from the book, "How to Spell Presbyterian" by James W. Angell)

Acts 14:19-23

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May 28, 2017

PROLOGUE

Five hundred years ago spiritual leaders like Martin Luther and John Calvin rediscovered the biblical teaching that the ministry of Jesus Christ is all for all Christians and not just a select few. There are many Christian groups that hold to this teaching today. One such group is known as "Presbyterians."

SCRIPTURE

But Jews came there from Antioch and Iconium and won over the crowds. Then they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead. {20} But when the disciples surrounded him, he got up and went into the city. The next day he went on with Barnabas to Derbe. {21} After they had proclaimed the good news to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, then on to Iconium and Antioch. {22} There they strengthened the souls of the disciples and encouraged them to continue in the faith, saying, "It is through many persecutions that we must enter the kingdom of God." {23} And after they had appointed elders for them in each church, with prayer and fasting they entrusted them to the Lord in whom they had come to believe (Acts 14:19-23 NRSV).

INTRODUCTION

A high school friend of mine said he almost became a Presbyterian but decided against it because it was too hard to spell. People often ask me how to spell "Presbyterian" whether I am opening a new account, responding to a survey, or providing my place of employment. But as James Angell, puts it, "Presbyterian is more than a twelve letter word. It is also an important piece of the Christian story."

So without becoming too literal about it, How *do* we spell Presbyterian?

1. IN A BIBLICAL WAY

We try to spell Presbyterian IN A BIBLICAL WAY.

The Greek word for "elder" in the New Testament is *presbuteros* (pres-BOO'-ter-os). This is where we get the word Presbyterian. It is a biblical term.

Presbyterian and Reformed churches have been guided by the teachings of the Protestant Reformers such as Martin Luther and John Calvin. However, Luther wanted to change only what was hopelessly corrupt about the church. Calvin wanted a more complete reformation of the church based on the teachings of Scripture. Queen Elizabeth I of England remarked that the teachings of Calvin were more “reformed” than the Lutheran. This term continues to be used today to describe Presbyterian beliefs.

Sometimes, Presbyterian and Reformed Christians are called “Calvinists” because of the influence of John Calvin. But for Presbyterian and Reformed Christians, Calvinism is just a nickname for biblical Christianity.

It was Calvin’s conviction that the Bible is the Word of God and therefore the final authority in belief and practice. Some churches put tradition on the same level or higher than the Bible. Some put church councils or church leaders on the same level or higher than the Bible. Some put personal experience on the same level or higher than the Bible. For Calvin, tradition, councils and personal experience were all important, but did not possess the same authority or the same witness of the Holy Spirit as the Scriptures.

2. IN AN ORDERLY WAY

We try to spell Presbyterian IN AN ORDERLY WAY. The Bible tells us that:

“All things should be done decently and in order” (1 Cor 14:40 NRSV).

Presbyterians take this to heart - almost to the point of obsession. We tend to be methodical about things and avoid haste in our decision-making. I often tell people there are three speeds in life, and in order they are: fast, slow and Presbyterian. We make glaciers look quick!

A Presbyterian church is a representative democracy governed by elders elected from and by the congregation. It is not by accident that the form of government for the United States is similar to the form of government for Presbyterians. Presbyterianism was so prevalent in early America that the British referred to the American Revolution as the “Presbyterian Revolt.” Several of the signers of the Declaration of Independence were Presbyterian including the Reverend John Witherspoon. Witherspoon had a profound influence on the education of James Madison, the architect of the U.S. Constitution.

3. IN A FAMILY WAY

We try to spell Presbyterian IN A FAMILY WAY.

God wants a family. This summarizes the story line of the entire Bible from Genesis to

Revelation. God chose the family of Abraham and Sarah to be the means by which God gathers a larger family to himself. God is at work in the world gathering a people to himself. This work is described in Ephesians in this way:

"[God's] unchanging plan has always been to adopt us into his own family by bringing us to himself through Jesus Christ" (Eph 1:5 NLT).

The vast majority of Christians around the world use a ritual with water called "baptism" to represent entrance to or identification with the family of God (also known as the church or the body of Christ). Many churches will place a baptismal at the physical entrance to the sanctuary to remind believers, as they gather for worship, what baptism means. Incidentally, this is why it makes absolutely no sense to baptize someone, whether adult or child, when there is no connection with the church.

Baptism is identification with the church. The word as it is used in the New Testament represents a great many other things, as well. Unfortunately, Christians have often been divided by the other meanings they have associated with baptism. For example, some also associate baptism with profession of faith and only baptize those who are old enough to make such a profession. But if you are a Presbyterian or Reformed Christian, then you also associate baptism with the sign of the covenant and follow the biblical example of conferring this sign on believers and the children of believers. As a sign of the covenant with God, baptism points to the promise of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ and the obligation to continue in faithful service to Christ all of our days.

4. IN AN INTELLIGENT WAY

We try to spell Presbyterian IN AN INTELLIGENT WAY. The greatest commandment states:

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your *mind* and with all your strength” (Mark 12:30 NIV).

Sadly, many people think having faith and using one’s mind are incompatible. But this is not what Presbyterians believe. We want to love God with our minds as well as with heart, soul and strength. To put it another way, in order to become a Presbyterian Christian, you don’t have to check your brains at the door!

Education has been one of the hallmarks of the Reformed tradition. From Calvin's Geneva, to John Knox's dictum for all of Scotland, "a school in every parish," to America and all parts of the world, education has been and continues to be a central feature of Presbyterian and Reformed ministry.

Several institutions of higher learning, such as Princeton University, were originally founded to provide for an educated clergy and laity. Unfortunately this has sometimes led to a certain kind of arrogance. Perhaps you have heard the new twist on the old saying: “You can always tell a Presbyterian ...but you can’t tell him very much!”

5. IN A HOPEFUL WAY

We try to spell Presbyterian IN A HOPEFUL WAY. David said to God:

“For you have been my hope, O Sovereign LORD, my confidence since my youth” (Psalms 71:5 NIV).

We may not know the future but we know who holds the future. God is in charge of the universe. And the God who is in charge of the universe has sent his Son into our world to redeem us. God in Jesus Christ has conquered sin and death and raises those who trust in him to eternal life.

We can have confidence as we face the future not because of who we are or what we have done but because of who God is and what God has done. Perhaps more than anything else, Presbyterian Christians have stressed that our salvation is of the Lord.

C. H. Spurgeon is widely regarded as one of the greatest preachers of all time and was also one who embraced Reformed theology. He said, “If anyone should ask me what I mean by a Calvinist, I should reply, ‘He is one who says, Salvation is of the Lord.’ I cannot find in Scripture any other doctrine than this. It is the essence of the Bible” (from *A Defense of Calvinism*).

Because our salvation is of the Lord we cannot boast if we have it nor can we despair of ever losing it. It is in God’s hands. Jesus said:

My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all ; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand (John 10:27-29 NIV).

6. IN A GRATEFUL WAY

We try to spell Presbyterian IN A GRATEFUL WAY. Paul writes:

“As God’s grace reaches more and more people, there will be great thanksgiving, and God will receive more and more glory” (2 Cor 4:15 NLT).

The appropriate response to God's grace is thankfulness. Grace refers to God's unmerited favor. All of God's gifts to us are undeserved, especially the gift of salvation. In spite of our sinfulness, God gave us his own Son to be the means by which we are forgiven.

It used to be that Presbyterians were strongly associated with grace. If you wanted to know about "The Doctrines of Grace" you would ask a Presbyterian. But unfortunately, we took the role a bit too seriously. An Anglican priest, departing for England after giving a series of lectures in Scotland, was asked how he liked Scotland. "The country has its good qualities," he said, "but it has three serious drawbacks. It's always raining. It's very cold. And there are too many Presbyterians." "In that case," replied his host, "I suggest you go to hell. It never rains. It's always hot. And there are no Presbyterians."

Thanksgiving was another quality that used to be associated with Presbyterians and it can be again. Knowing we are justified by grace through faith, and that it is God's gift to us, the Christian life then becomes one of thanksgiving to God. Committed service to the worship of God, the imitation of Christ in loving neighbors, and telling real Good News to the whole world becomes our calling. In our best moments we are fearless in the pursuit of justice, truth, and compassionate action. And we do it because God is good.

7. IN A WHOLISTIC WAY

We try to spell Presbyterian IN A WHOLISTIC WAY.

Dr. David Livingstone is renowned as one of the greatest missionaries of all time. For thirty years, until his death in 1873, his life was spent in an unwearied effort to fulfill a three-fold mission: 1) Relieve suffering, 2) Increase knowledge and 3) Proclaim the Gospel. He relieved suffering as a medical doctor and as an abolitionist, increased knowledge as an explorer and scientist, and proclaimed the Gospel through teaching and preaching.

Livingstone had a profound influence on the Presbyterian Church which, in turn, embraced his definition of mission. "Mission" means to serve the world by carrying out 1) The Great Commandment - by showing love for God and neighbor, 2) The Cultural Mandate - by being salt and light for society, and 3) The Great Commission - by making new disciples.

Medical missions have long been an important part of our heritage. Today, the Medical Benevolence Foundation is arguable one of the best medical missionary organizations in the world. It is also one of the best kept secrets of the Presbyterian Church.

CONCLUSION

Anybody who is a Christian can be a Presbyterian. We are guided by a pattern of

religious thought known as Reformed theology and a structure that stresses active participation in ministry by both clergy and laity. We are only one part of the family of God but we believe we have something to contribute to the greater Church. To paraphrase the scholars of Westminster Abbey, “Together we can grow in our desire to glorify God and enjoy God forever.”