



**WHAT IS
PRESBYTERIAN?**

A Brief Explanation

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Presbyterian Church in America

DISCIPLESHIP MINISTRIES

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Although many publishers do not capitalize terms, and particularly pronouns which refer to the Trinity, in this study CDM publications has capitalized those terms—unless quoted from other publishers—for clarity of reference. Likewise, Church is capitalized when referring to the universal Church from eternity past to eternity future but is not capitalized when referring to a local congregation or a denomination.

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Introduction

The Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) is a Christian denomination in the Reformed tradition. However, that sentence may not mean a whole lot to you. What exactly is *Presbyterian*? What is the *Reformed* tradition? What do Presbyterians believe? These are some of the questions this booklet was written to answer. Our goal is to introduce the gospel and the PCA clearly to people who are new to one or both.

While there are a number of North American denominations that call themselves presbyterian, they do not all hold to the same doctrine and practice. Some Presbyterians, such as the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC), are very similar to the PCA. Others, such as the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America PC(USA) are significantly different on a variety of issues of doctrine and practice. In this booklet, you will find a concise introduction to the gospel as well as PCA theology, practice, and history. This booklet will briefly explain critical ideas, give essential definitions, and suggest Scripture passages to explore. If you want to study a bit more deeply, you will also find a list of resources at the end. By the way, something you should know about Presbyterians is that we love recommending good books!

Our hope is that this short book serves as a helpful introduction to the Presbyterian Church in America.



THE

GOSPEL

The Gospel

Before we dive into any of the distinctives of the PCA, we need to think about what all Christians hold in common: the gospel. Christians talk a lot about the gospel. We preach the gospel. We believe the gospel. We share the gospel. We live in light of the gospel. We try to make our churches gospel-centered. We want others to believe the gospel. But what exactly is *the gospel* we talk about so much? The meaning of the word *gospel* is “good news.” In short, the gospel is the true message of the historic work of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, on behalf of sinners, to bring the kingdom of God. To get a fuller understanding of the gospel, we will look at a handful of passages in the book of Romans to understand what Christians mean when we talk about the gospel.

OUR NEED

We summarize *the gospel* as the true message of the historic work of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, on behalf of sinners, to bring the kingdom of God. We may bristle at the idea of sin, but sin is a deadly serious issue. Paul wrote, “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth” (Rom. 1:18). This is a scary proposition. The Bible presents God as the sovereign Creator of everything, who is perfectly righteous, just, holy, all-powerful, and the One who sustains all of life. Here we are told He is revealing His wrath against the unrighteous people who have suppressed the truth about Him. That’s a lot to take in. At this point we may be wondering how there can be any hope at all. We will get to that. On the other hand, we may be thinking, it doesn’t say God’s wrath is being revealed against everyone, just those unrighteous truth-suppressors. Maybe Paul is only talking about some people; perhaps there’s hope for the rest of us.

Unfortunately, as we keep reading Paul's letter, we find some more scary stuff. First, in Romans 3:11-18, Paul linked a bunch of Old Testament quotes together to tell us just how sinful these unrighteous people, against whom the wrath of God is being revealed, actually are. Then, just a few verses later Paul wrote, "For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God . . ." (Rom. 3:22b-23). At this point, it's clear, we *all* are the unrighteous truth-suppressors. We *all* are sinners, Paul says, and God's wrath is being revealed against *all* of us. But wait a minute. Who gets to say we are sinners? What even *is* sin?

One of the other letters in the New Testament is called 1 John. John was one of Jesus's first disciples, and he wrote five of the books in the New Testament including the letter we call 1 John. In this letter, John gave us a straightforward definition of sin when he wrote, "Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness" (1 John 3:4). God created the world and everything in it to work in a certain way for His glory and the good of all creation. The way we are supposed to operate in this world is defined in God's law. In the Old Testament the law is summed up in the Ten Commandments. In the New Testament, Jesus summarized the law saying, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 22:37-39). God's law requires perfect and perpetual love for God and others. When we do what God's law tells us not to do, and when we don't do what God's law tells us to do, we are living lawless lives. We are sinning. We are living as unrighteous truth-suppressors. So much for God's wrath being revealed against some and there being hope for the rest of us. The Bible is clear: we are *all* in the same boat together.

GOD'S SOLUTION

This all begs another question: How is this *good* news? So far, all we have learned is about God's wrath being revealed against sinners, which, admittedly, is not great news, and then we are told we are all sinners—also, not good news. True, we have heard some hard truths, but we haven't heard the whole story just yet. Remember we started by saying the gospel is about *the finished work of Jesus on behalf of sinners*. Seeing that we all are sinners leads to the next part of the story. We only looked at Romans 3:23, “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God . . .” Paul continued in the next verses, “and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith” (Rom 3:24-25a).

The bad news of there being no distinction between Jews and Greeks, or any other people group or individual for that matter, “for all have sinned,” is the *prelude* to the good news. Just as there is no distinction in our being sinners, so there is no distinction in how various folks will be saved from the wrath of God that is being revealed against their sin. The only way to be justified is by grace through faith in Christ. In these three verses, Romans 3:23-25, Paul used several really important words: *justified*, *grace*, *redemption*, *propitiation*, and *faith*. It is important to make sure we understand what each of these means.

Justification

First, let's think about *justified*, or *justification*. When we have messed up in some way, perhaps by disobeying our parents, breaking a rule while driving, or failing in a task at work, our immediate tendency is to justify ourselves. We come up with an excuse or story that explains why we should still be thought of in good terms even though we have failed. We failed, but we are trying to declare ourselves righteous. We are trying to *justify* ourselves. When we talk about *justification* in theology, we are also talking about a sinner

being declared righteous. However, there are two key differences between our example and justification when it is related to the gospel. In our example, a sinner was seeking to declare himself righteous without any basis for doing so. When we talk about justification theologically, it is God who declares the sinner righteous, and He does so on the basis of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Because it is God, the One before whom we are guilty, who declares us righteous, and because He does so on the basis of what Jesus has done for us, when Paul said we are justified, he was saying we are pardoned and counted righteous by God Himself, the judge of all, on the basis of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Grace

The next word of Paul's that we want to look at is *grace*. Once again, this is a fairly common word that is being used in a specific theological way in this verse. We might know a woman named Grace. When we have a meal, we might "say grace" before we eat. When we meet someone who is particularly giving or forgiving, we say they are gracious. In theology, *grace* has to do with getting something you have not earned, something that you don't deserve. When Paul said we have been justified by grace, he is telling us we didn't earn our justification. It was freely given and not on account of anything we did to earn or deserve it.

Redemption

Redemption is another important word Paul used in Romans 3:23-25. Perhaps the most common use of *redemption* today is in sports. If an athlete has a bad game, you might hear a commentator wonder if they will be able to redeem themselves in the next game. One way to think about this is that the athlete is making up for their poor performance. Another way to think about this is the athlete being freed from the bad reputation, or perhaps some other consequence such as being benched, that they earned with their

poor performance in the previous game. When Paul talked about “redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (v. 24), he was saying Jesus has set us free. But what has He set us free from? Jesus has set us free from sin and its consequences. He has set us free from the condemnation of God’s law, which we disobey. He has set us free from the wrath being revealed against us.

Propitiation

Paul used another word, *propitiation*, which may be an entirely new word to you. It is not a particularly common word. *Propitiation* is a word that has been used mostly in theological settings. In ancient Greece it had to do with appeasing the gods; for example, a sacrifice to the gods might be a propitiation. Paul’s use is not altogether different. He explained Jesus was put forward as a *propitiation*. However, that is not all Paul wrote. First, verse 25 says, “whom God put forward as a propitiation.” Furthermore, Jesus was a propitiation “by his blood.” In other words, God put His own Son, Jesus, forward to be sacrificed as a propitiation to please God. But what had to be satisfied? God’s wrath that was being revealed against sin. That is a lot to think about, and it begs a question: Why was a sacrifice needed in the first place? We’ll get to that in just a bit.

Faith

The final word Paul used in these verses that we need to be clear about is another common word, *faith*. In our culture, *faith* can be an inspirational word, even if we have no idea what it is meant to convey. Take a piece of distressed wood and write the word *faith* on it, and people will buy it and hang it in their house. At other times, *faith* is the idea of believing something good will happen in the future, even if it is against all odds. Going into a competition, an underdog might say, “You just have to have faith, and anything is possible.” In this sense, faith is a “magical” way to make that

which is against all odds a real possibility. In the Bible, *faith* does pertain to hope for the future, but it is not a hope against all odds. Faith is not looking to the future through nothing, believing that it will all just somehow work out in the end. Rather, the author of Hebrews wrote, “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Heb.11:1). The “assurance” and “conviction” are not based on an empty hope but on the finished work of Jesus Christ. In Romans 10:9, Paul’s teaching helps us understand that *faith* is confessing and believing Jesus is who the Scripture claims He is and did what the Scripture claims He did. He is God in the flesh, and He lived, died, and rose again for the salvation of His people. Faith is looking to the future through Jesus and His finished work on our behalf.

With these definitions in mind, let’s re-read Romans 3:22b-25a.

For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.

Paul began by announcing some bad news, “all have sinned,” but then he proclaimed the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ. When we talk about the finished work of Jesus, we are talking about the redemption Jesus purchased by His life, death, and resurrection. We say His work is finished because nothing is lacking for our justification. Notice that Paul declared that through Jesus we are justified. Because Jesus’s work was finished in the past, we stand justified in the present. Jesus has done all that is needed to be done for sinners to be justified. The gospel isn’t “clean yourself up and get your act together and you will be justified in Christ.” The gospel is “all that God requires for you to be justified has already been accomplished by Jesus.” Paul went on to make this clear later in his letter to the Romans.

GOOD NEWS FOR SINNERS

Just two chapters later, Paul wrote, “For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:6-8). In other words, God didn’t wait for us to be worth dying for. Notice what Paul was telling us: the right time for Jesus to die for us was “while we were still weak,” “while we were still sinners.” God didn’t wait around for us to get our act together. He couldn’t. We never would. “While we were still sinners” was the exact right time for Jesus to die for us because it was the only possible time that He could have. Notice what else Paul said. Sending Christ to die for us was a display of God’s love for us. That’s right. God loves sinners! This begs a question yet again: Why did Jesus have to die for us? Couldn’t redemption have happened some other way?

Paul answered this question for us in Romans 6:23: “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” The reason Jesus had to die is because death is what sin deserves. Death is the wages, what was earned, by our sin. Death has always been what sin earns. All the way back in Genesis 2, when God first made Adam, death was the penalty for sin. Genesis 2:16-17 reads, “And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, ‘You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.’”

It’s hard to accept, but the Bible is clear—what our sin deserves is the eternal punishment of death. If Jesus was going to redeem us from sin, if He was going to be the *propitiation* for our sin, satisfying divine justice, He had to give what our sin deserved, so He died in our place. This was the wrath that He took for us. Jesus was our substitute in death, and only He could be a substitute for us because only He was sinless. Jesus had no sin of His own for

which He needed to die. His death was to pay the price for the sins of His people.

And what is the result of the death of Christ? Skipping ahead a few chapters in Romans, we find the glorious answer: “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1). If you are “in Christ Jesus,” that is united to Him by faith, your sin does not condemn you. You are forgiven! By His life, death, and resurrection, Jesus fulfilled the law, condemned sin, and rose in victory over sin and death, silencing the law’s condemnation of all who believe in Him.

SUMMARIZING THE GOOD NEWS

The gospel is not “what God means to me,” “how God has changed my life for the better,” or “how I have served God.” The gospel is this message of the work of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, on behalf of sinners. This is the central claim of Christianity that all true Christians hold in common. Perhaps this has been a reminder to you of the sweetness of the gospel by which you have been saved. If so, praise God! Go share this wonderful news with someone else. Perhaps you have been pondering these truths or even reading them for the first time, and they resonate with you, and you believe this good news. If so, praise God yet again! “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing: it is the gift of God . . .” (Eph. 2:8). If this is where you are, I encourage you to talk with your pastor to ask him any questions you may have about what it means to be a Christian and what it means to live as a citizen of God’s kingdom.

With this first piece in place, let’s turn our attention to what else the PCA believes.