PRESBYTERIANISM

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To my fellow pastors and elders at
Independent Presbyterian Church
in Memphis, Tennessee,
and especially my own pastor,
Mike Malone

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FOREWORD

It has often been said—sometimes with a sense of humor and sometimes in annoyance—that Presbyterian and Reformed churches love to do things "decently and in order." I can understand both the humor and the frustration that lie behind that sentiment. We love our plans, our minutes, our courts, and our committees. Presbyterian and Reformed folks have been known to appoint committees just to oversee other committees (reminding me of the old *Onion* headline that announced "New Starbucks Opens in Rest Room of Existing Starbucks"). We like doing things so decently that we expect our church officers to know three things: the Bible, our confessions, and a book with *Order* in its title.

But before we shake our heads in disbelief at those uber-Reformed types (physician, heal thyself!), we should recall that before "decently and in order" was a Presbyterian predilection, it was a biblical command (see 1 Cor. 14:40). Paul's injunction for the church to be marked by propriety and decorum, to be well-ordered like troops drawn up in ranks, is a fitting conclusion to a portion of Scripture that deals with confusion regarding

gender, confusion at the Lord's Table, confusion about spiritual gifts, confusion in the body of Christ, and confusion in public worship. "Decently and in order" sounds pretty good compared to the mess that prevailed in Corinth.

A typical knock on Presbyterian and Reformed Christians is that though supreme in head, they are deficient in heart. We are the emotionless stoics, the changeless wonders, God's frozen chosen. But such veiled insults would not have impressed the apostle Paul, for he knew that the opposite of order in the church is not free-flowing spontaneity; it is self-exalting chaos. God never favors confusion over peace (see 1 Cor. 14:33). He never pits theology against doxology or head against heart. David Garland put it memorably: "The Spirit of ardor is also the Spirit of order."[1]

When Jason Helopoulos approached me about writing a foreword for this series, I was happy to oblige—not only because Jason is one of my best friends (and we both root for the hapless Chicago Bears) but because these careful, balanced, and well-reasoned volumes will occupy an important place on the book stalls of Presbyterian and Reformed churches. We need short, accessible books written by thoughtful, seasoned pastors for regular members on the foundational elements of church life and ministry. That's what we need, and that's what this series delivers: wise answers to many of the church's most practical and pressing questions.

This series of books on Presbyterian and Reformed theology, worship, and polity is not a multivolume exploration of 1 Corinthians 14:40, but I am glad it is unapologetically written with Paul's command in mind. The reality is that every church will worship in some way, pray in some way, be led in some way, be structured in some way, and do baptism and the Lord's Supper in some way. Every church is living out some form of theology—even if that theology is based on pragmatism instead of biblical principles. Why wouldn't we want the life we share in the church to be shaped by the best exegetical, theological, and historical reflections? Why wouldn't we want to be thoughtful instead of thoughtless? Why wouldn't we want all things in the life we live together to be done decently and in good order? That's not the Presbyterian and Reformed way. That's God's way, and Presbyterian and Reformed Christians would do well not to forget it.

Kevin DeYoung
Senior Pastor, Christ Covenant Church
Matthews, North Carolina

Introduction

WELCOME TO PRESBYTERIANISM

For more than twenty years, I've conducted new member classes in the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) congregations where I've served as a pastor. After explaining the gospel, I've gone on to explain what makes Presbyterian beliefs, practices, and stories unique; how Presbyterians are different from other denominational flavors; and ultimately how people can join our congregation and find a place in our life together. Through these classes, I've seen hundreds and hundreds of people join our Presbyterian churches. But there's one thing I haven't done.

I've not told anyone why being Presbyterian is good for you.

I guess I just assumed that it was. After all, with my family, I made the journey from evangelical and fundamentalist circles—with a heavy Baptist influence—into Presbyterianism. I've spent a great deal of time writing about, talking about, and ultimately preaching and teaching Presbyterian beliefs, practices, and stories, hoping to inculcate Presbyterian identity into our children and

adults. Of course Presbyterianism is good for people, isn't it? After all, it is good enough for me.

Some voices today question this. Their questions come not simply because of denominational jockeying as different visions or identities bump up against each other: Baptists, Lutherans, Methodists, nondenominationals all setting out their version of what Christianity is all about. No, the questions are more significant: Can Presbyterianism really protect the weak and wounded? Don't all denominations ultimately become corrupt, self-protective, theologically unfaithful? Can't someone simply hold to "Reformed theology" without holding on to Presbyterian polity? How does oversight by pastors and elders translate to life in the pews and to growth in God's grace—isn't this just an example of a hierarchical, patriarchal power imbalance keeps people chained to a group of elites?

Those are real questions, hard questions, ones that must be answered. As you will read, I believe there are answers to these questions, and more besides—and that these answers come from a fully integrated understanding of what Presbyterianism is all about.

First, I want to lay out for you what I take to be the way Presbyterian identity is formed and shaped. Presbyterians share a certain set of beliefs. Although these beliefs are not unique in the history of Christianity, the way Presbyterians have framed them might be. As we discuss those core understandings of God, humans, sin, salvation,

community, and hope, we will see that they give rise to practices of piety, worship, and especially polity that reinforce those beliefs. Presbyterian beliefs can't be divorced from practice, nor can Presbyterian practices be divorced from beliefs; they are integrated together. There are a series of historical accounts of why these beliefs and practices have worked together and make sense; I will only touch on these stories along the way, but we can't forget them completely. All of this works together to shape what it means to be Presbyterian—and that's a good thing!

From there, we will come to the three central chapters of the book. These have a Trinitarian shape. They take us first to the idea that God is sovereign. If Presbyterians are known for anything, it is our commitment to God's sovereignty. This emphasis upon God's sovereignty is good for us because it teaches us that we are dependent beings who rest in the hands of a Father who rules the world. God's sovereign rule displayed in creation, providence, and election gives Presbyterians a calming comfort because we know that our world belongs to God and that our God loves us and his world.

Next, we will see that Christ is King. Our old Covenanter forefathers declared that they were "for Christ's crown and covenant."[1] Christ's crown, his present rule over the world and his church, is the result of his resurrection and ascension: God's sovereign rule is exercised specifically through Jesus Christ. Thus, Christ is Lord over us as individuals, forming us as disciples; he is Lord over

his church, ruling through his elders in the courts of his church; and he is Lord over his world, sending us into the world to witness and work in every place we find ourselves. Christ's lordship offers us Presbyterians a sense of protection when we honor Christ's crown and obey his Word.

Finally, we see that the Holy Spirit continues to shape our lives today. When Christ ascended to the Father's right hand, he promised to send his Spirit to do specific work on his behalf among his followers. The Holy Spirit does this work through the corporate means of grace—Word, sacrament, and prayer—and uses these means to call us to himself, convert us, and sanctify us. Presbyterianism is committed to the ordinary means of grace in the context of corporate worship, which offers a sense of expectation because the Spirit promises us his Word to convict us, convert us, and conform us to Christ's image.

From there, I will try to answer some of the most frequently asked questions about Presbyterianism that I've received over decades of ministry. Although some of my answers will be shaped by the fact that I'm a PCA pastor, I trust that through appeals to Scripture and our doctrinal standards (as well as a little Presbyterian history) you will see that these are not simply my opinions but represent the mainstream of historic Presbyterianism.

In the end, though, my goal is to persuade you that Presbyterianism is good for you, for your soul, for your family, and ultimately for God's church and world. Let's see together how that's true.

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WHAT IS PRESBYTERIANISM?

Many moons ago now, I served as a pastor in a city that had a very large Baptist seminary. Though I tried not to be conspicuous to seminarians training for Baptist ministry, it seemed inevitable that as they learned about the Reformation or as they wrestled with what the Bible said about God's sovereignty in election, they would track me down and ask to have coffee together. And once we'd get together, with our hot coffees sitting in front of us, they'd say, "Tell me about Presbyterianism."

I must admit that, even as a newly minted Presbyterian pastor, I didn't talk to these students about Presbyterian church government right off the bat. Nor did I unpack Presbyterian history, worship, or even covenant theology. Rather, when I began to tell someone who was exploring Presbyterianism what it was, I usually started with God's sovereignty in creation, providence, and election and moved on from there.

Does that strike you as weird? After all, the word *Presbyterian* has buried in it the Greek word for "elder."

Presbyterian forefathers stood for a form of church government in which Christ ruled over his church through elders freely chosen by the congregation rather than imposed either by the state or by wealthy patrons. As I told them about Presbyterianism, shouldn't I have started with church government after all?

I don't think so. As was the case then, so it has proven to be: Most of the time, as people begin to explore Presbyterianism, they do so through key beliefs such as God's sovereignty in election or covenant theology. Once those core understandings make sense to them, they start to explore practices such as church government or worship. They might dip into Presbyterian history, the stories that provide context for why Presbyterians do the peculiar things we do. But most of the time, those who are exploring Presbyterianism approach it through its beliefs.

Identity

To me, approaching Presbyterianism through its beliefs makes sense—because beliefs, practices, and stories combine to shape our identities. Although I've written a much longer book than this one exploring various beliefs, practices, and stories that combine to form a Presbyterian identity,[1] it might be helpful for us to think a little bit more about this idea of identity and why it is so important.

We live in a culture today that is consumed with issues of identity. Race, gender, class, region—even where one

goes to college or what college football team one prefers—can be used to identify people in certain ways. Of course, this type of self-identification is an utterly late-modern phenomenon. In a premodern or early modern world, our identities were formed through social relations and family networks. Who we were was shaped by those to whom we were related.

It is still that way to a degree, of course. One time I attended a fundraising event that honored a church member who was the former mayor of our town. I was standing near a wall (my usual spot at such events), dressed in a suit with a bow tie. Into the room walked the president emeritus of the University of Southern Mississippi, Dr. Aubrey Lucas. He was famous for wearing bow ties, and so when he saw mine, he made his way over to introduce himself. "I'm Dr. Aubrey Lucas," he offered in his Deep South drawl.

"Well, I'm Dr. Sean Lucas," I returned.

"Dr. Lucas!" he exclaimed as though discovering long-lost kinfolk—which he began to try to ascertain. "You wouldn't happen to be related to the Mississippi Lucases?"

"I'm afraid not," I replied, "I'm connected to the Virginia Lucases."

He sighed and said, "It's probably just as well."

What was going on there? It was an attempt to figure out one's identity through social relations and family networks. Our branches of the Lucas family tree were several states away; perhaps if we could trace them back

far enough, they would connect. But identity is the thing that we were seeking: Who are you? And who am I?

There were other ways in the premodern and early modern world in which identity was shaped and formed. Trades were generally passed through the generations: Grandfather, father, and son were all lawyers, farmers, blacksmiths, or the like. Church connections were determined more by birth than overt belief. One was Catholic or Anglican, Presbyterian or Baptist, because of a long history of family connection to that particular church. The result was that identity was fairly static, predetermined by others even before birth.

That's not the case today. Social mobility has led to geographic mobility, which in turn means the loss of extended and even nuclear family ties. It is common today for one's children to be flung across the country or around the world after they graduate from college and move onto their career tracks. Those careers are chosen because of one's individual interests and aptitudes, not because it was "the family business." If there are church connections, they are determined by belief as much as by birth. And of course, with the late-modern insistence on the importance of sexual identity, we must choose even our pronouns to represent our sense of self.

The result is that today identity feels radically dynamic. We create it ourselves through a series of choices and can change it in an instant to recreate ourselves or to be truer to our sense of self.

Presbyterian Identity

Many Presbyterians have a sense that our Presbyterian identity is self-selected. Perhaps we were unbelievers previously or were raised in another denomination. Yet even as we consider why we identify as Presbyterian, three major components combine to shape our sense of Presbyterian selves.

The first is *belief*. What we mean by belief are those core understandings that shape who we are and what we do. And Presbyterians have beliefs that mark them out from other evangelical Christians. The beliefs that we will talk about in this little book will include God's sovereignty over his creation, Christ's kingship over his church, and the Spirit's use of the preached Word, sacraments, and prayer. From these, this book will unpack other distinctly Presbyterian beliefs that follow. Even those who know a little bit about Presbyterians know we are big on doctrine, teaching, and belief.

But belief is not the only component of identity. *Practice* is as well. Practices are those regular activities in which we engage that flow from and reinforce our beliefs. For Presbyterians, those practices certainly include our practices of church government and our practices of worship. Although on the one hand we insist that there are elements of worship and church government contained in Holy Scripture that we must honor and use, on the other hand we recognize that there are circumstances that

are open to common sense and general wisdom. In other words, we know that not everything in our "books of order" is explicitly contained in the Bible. These are practices that we trust cohere with the general trajectory of the Bible and help us do the elements of church government.

Stories are the final component of Presbyterian identity. We can think about these stories like pictures in the family album (or maybe today, more like social-media posts!). Presbyterian stories tell us about people and events that put beliefs and practices to the test or forged them during in a particular time of stress. Sometimes when we learn these stories, we have almost "aha" moments—"Oh, that's why we do what we do! Why we are the way we are! Why I experienced thus and so!" Unfortunately, I don't have many Presbyterian stories in this book, but there are several good places to go to read such narratives.[2]

As beliefs, practices, and stories combine, they communicate a particular way of being in the world. When we come to see ourselves as Presbyterian, that means we have embraced Presbyterian beliefs and practices as our own.

Better Together

According to an article in *Christianity Today*, in the 2010s the number of nondenominational churches in the United States grew by nine thousand congregations, representing an additional two million professing believers.[3] There are now more than five times more

nondenominational congregations than in the mainline Presbyterian Church (USA) and more than twenty times more than my own denomination, the PCA. In terms of the larger religious marketplace, the "nons" have swamped the Presbyterians and every other denomination. This growth of nondenominational churches, paired with the decline in many denominations throughout North America, raises questions whether Presbyterianism—with its distinctive beliefs, practices, and stories—is worth the effort.[4]

If I'm right about this whole issue of identity, then we must recognize that most nondenominational churches are not actually "nondenominational" or "independent." They have their own beliefs, practices, and stories—their own identity. They inevitably create networks for mission, work together for theological education, and assist one another with credentialing. Whether it is Acts 29, Soma, or the Association of Related Churches, these networks act like denominations: They assist with mission strategy and church-planter training and certification. Churches need denominations or denomination-like entities because no single congregation can accomplish as much alone as it can in partnership with others—which is a fundamental insight of Presbyterianism.

Indeed, Presbyterianism as expressed in Presbyterian denominations is a necessary expression of our theology and polity, which recognizes regional groupings of churches that are connected for mission. Working together in this way is part of the Presbyterian DNA.

The question for Presbyterians isn't whether to be in a denomination; the question is *which* denomination?

My hope is that you are reading this book either as a member of a Presbyterian denomination or as someone exploring Presbyterianism. I hope you will believe that your Presbyterian church is a blessing to you because it is part of a group of churches that desires to be faithful to Scripture, true to the Reformed faith, and obedient to the Great Commission. There are several faithful Presbyterian denominations that desire to do this (even though I just gave the motto of my denomination, the Presbyterian Church in America). These Presbyterian denominations work out of the original vision of the first presbytery moderator in the American colonies, Francis Makemie. He claimed that the Philadelphia Presbytery was formed in 1706 in order "to consult the most proper measures, for advancing religion, and propagating Christianity, in our Various Stations."[5] That's what Presbyterians want to do, no matter which denomination they find themselves in.

And so Presbyterianism has an opportunity to grasp hold of Makemie's vision once again. What are the most proper measures for advancing religion and propagating Christianity in our various stations? This will necessarily look different in rural areas versus the suburbs or the city, or in the Northeast versus the Southwest. And it may look different across Presbyterian denominations.

However, I believe that regardless of where we go and how we go about it, Presbyterians will find that the

church is better when it works together to honor God's rule over his world, Christ's rule over his church, and the Spirit's work in and through the church. Presbyterianism blesses every single one of us because we work together in this way.

Questions for Further Reflection

1. Why are belief, story, and practice all important aspects of the formation of a Presbyterian identity?
2. To what extent do we create our own identity? How do God's sovereignty and our community fit in?
3. What are some advantages when churches work together?
4. If you weren't raised in Presbyterianism, what about it interests you most? If you were, what aspect do you most value?
5. How does Presbyterianism bless its members?