

Denominationalism, Religious Cults and World Religions

Lesson 7

The Presbyterian Church

Introduction:

The Presbyterian Church is a religious denomination that traces its origin to the influence of the French/Swiss theologian, John Calvin, and his teachings which are most commonly known as Calvinism. The man who is most directly responsible for the beginning of the Presbyterian Church is John Knox (1514-1572), a Scotsman who studied with Calvin in Geneva, Switzerland and brought his teachings back to Scotland. Knox was a fiery preacher who opposed the king of England, the Church of England, and all Roman Catholic tendencies. He led the fight to separate the Church of Scotland from the Church of England.

The Presbyterian Church originated in Scotland, and traces its roots to the Scottish Reformation. During the years 1643-1648 "The Westminster Assembly" met to establish a formal catechism (a brief summary of beliefs), organize the Church under a "presbyterian" form of government, and produce the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, a creed of Presbyterians until it was revised in 1967. Scotland ensured the Presbyterian form of church government in the *Acts of Union* in 1707 which created the kingdom of Great Britain. Therefore, even most Presbyterians in England during the early 1700's were able to trace themselves back to a Scottish connection. Scottish and Scots-Irish immigrants were also responsible for bringing the Presbyterian Church to North America. In the twentieth century, some Presbyterians played an important role in the Ecumenical Movement, including the World Council of Churches. Many Presbyterian denominations have found ways of working together with other denominations, such as Congregationalists, Lutherans, Anglicans, and Methodists.

The Presbyterian Church (USA), headquartered in Louisville, Kentucky, is the largest Presbyterian body in the U.S., while the Presbyterian Church of America (PCA), based in Atlanta, Georgia, is fundamentally more conservative, and is the second largest. Originally the headquarters of the Presbyterian Church was at Westminster in London, England.

While Presbyterians generally hold to the teachings of John Calvin, John Knox and other early reformers, there is a wide range of theological views within contemporary Presbyterianism. However, some of the basic tenants of the Presbyterian Church are:

- The Sovereignty of God. Calvin taught God's sovereignty and God's will is "absolute" – meaning everything that happens in the world (good or bad) is the will of God. Calvin denied that God's will is also "permissive" – meaning God allows evil to take place in the world even though He is not the author of it, nor is

it in keeping with His will. (This is why people will say of some tragedy, "It's God's will.")

- Salvation by grace through faith alone in Jesus Christ. However, Calvin's concept of salvation by grace through faith alone is based on the false assumption that God has foreordained and predestined ("elected") some to be saved while others are predestined to be lost. Therefore, only those whom God has chosen to be saved are saved by the irresistible force of God's grace and the working of the Holy Spirit in their lives.
- The authority of the Scriptures. Although Calvin claimed the Scriptures should be the only basis of authority in the church, Presbyterians also have adopted various "confessions of faith" (such as the *Westminster Confession of Faith*) which all have some level of authoritative status. Furthermore, Calvin believed only God's "elect" (those foreordained and predestined to be saved) could properly understand and interpret the Scriptures.

Presbyterian denominations derive their name from the Greek word *presbýteros* (πρεσβύτερος), "elder." (Presbyterian church in Acts 14:23, 20:17, Titus 1:5). Congregations are governed by councils (known as *courts*) of elders. However, the Presbyterian Church makes a distinction between "teaching elders" and "ruling elders." Teaching and ruling elders are ordained and convene in the lowest council known as a *session* which is responsible for the discipline, nurture, and mission of the local congregation. Teaching elders (pastors) have responsibility for teaching, worship, and performing sacraments (such as baptism and administering communion). Pastors are appointed by individual congregations. Even though a local congregation may issue a "call" for a pastor's service, this "call" must be ratified by the local presbytery.

Ruling elders are usually laymen (or laywomen in some countries) who are elected by the congregation and ordained to serve with the teaching elders, assuming responsibility for nurture and leadership of the congregation. Often, especially in larger congregations, the elders delegate the care of buildings, finance, and ministry to the needy in the congregation to a distinct group of officers called "deacons." This group may be known as a "Deacon Board," "Board of Deacons," "Diaconate," "Deacons' Court." Although the Presbyterian Church of America (PCA) does not allow women to be ordained or appointed as pastors, elders or deacons, women could be appointed to the office of "Deaconess" – appointed to serve with and assist deacons. However, recently, the PCA is taking steps to remove that title and office, and restrict how women serve in the church.

Above the sessions exist "Presbyteries," which are groups of congregations in a geographical area. The "Presbytery" is composed of teaching elders and ruling elders from each of the individual congregations. The Presbytery sends representatives to a broader regional assembly such as a "Synod" (although Synods are generally no longer kept by the Presbyterian Church in America, Ireland, and by the Church of Scotland). However, the Presbytery does send representatives to a national assembly known as the "General Assembly." This congregation / presbytery / synod / general assembly

form of government is based on the historical structure of the Church of Scotland or the Presbyterian Church (USA).

I. Presbyterian Doctrine vs. Bible Doctrine

- A. Traditionally, Presbyterians hold a number of Bible truths:
 1. They believe in the virgin birth of Jesus Christ, His vicarious death to atone for sins, His bodily resurrection from the dead.
 - a. However, some Presbyterian bodies no longer consider these essential to faith.
 2. Presbyterians emphasize a high standard of morality.
 3. They understand that local churches are to be governed by elders (presbyters), with the assistance of deacons.
 - a. However, the Presbyterian Church also has a hierarchal form of government above that of the local congregation, consisting of a Presbytery, (a Synod in some places) and a General Assembly.
 4. While Presbyterians believe in the inspiration of the Scriptures, they believe in "Thought Inspiration" rather than "Verbal Inspiration."
 - a. Thought inspiration: This view contends that it is not the words, but the thoughts or ideas, that God inspired. Those who hold this view believe God put the thoughts or ideas into the minds of the apostles and prophets, allowing each to explain those thoughts in their own words. This method of inspiration is frequently used to explain the different personalities or literary styles of the various writers of Scripture. While the proponents of this theory do not believe God communicated the exact words He wanted revealed, they maintain the message itself is from God, and therefore of divine origin. While this view explains the stylistic differences in the Bible, it does so at the cost of weakening the claim of infallibility. If the writers of the Bible were allowed to express God's thoughts or ideas in their own words, how can we claim that the final product is really God's Word? Furthermore, how can the final product claim

to be infallible or authoritative if God simply allowed the apostles and prophets to chose whatever words they felt best expressed God's intentions?

- b. Verbal inspiration: This view is clearly the one that is in harmony with the Bible. This position states that all the words which are written in Scripture are God-breathed (2 Tim 3:16). It further states that in giving His thoughts in the form of words, God also guided the writer of Scripture in the choice of words that were in keeping with the author's personality, cultural and educational background, so that the end product is the Word of God while at the same time being the words of men. "What is it that is inspired? The words of Scripture. How, then, is inspiration to be defined? Inspiration is that mysterious process by which the guidance of God on the human prophet invests their writings with divine authority. It is the process by which Spirit-moved men (2 Pet 1:20-21) produced Spirit-breathed writings (2 Tim 3:16)."¹

B. However, the Presbyterian Church teaches doctrinal error on a number of fundamental Biblical truths.

- 1. They accept human "confessions of faith."
 - a. The Presbyterian Church USA has adopted the *Book of Confessions*, which incorporates other confessions in addition to the *Westminster Confession of Faith*. These include the *Nicene Creed*, and the *Apostles' Creed*, and other more recent confessions.
 - b. The Bible teaches that it alone is the source of authority in all matters concerning faith and doctrine:
 - (1). God's Word, the Bible, is given by inspiration of the Holy Spirit (2 Sam 23:2; Jer 1:9; 2 Tim 3:16-17; Gal 1:6-9; 2 Pet 1:20-21; 1 Thess 2:13).

¹ Geisler and Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, pp. 44-45.

- (2). The Word must not be altered, added to, subtracted from, or changed in any way (Deut 4:3; Prov 30:6; Rev 22:18-19).
 - (3). We will all be judged by the Word of God at the Last Day! (John 12:48).
2. Presbyterians practice the baptism of infants (because of their Calvinistic belief in original sin) as well as unbaptized adults, and administer baptism through "aspersion" (sprinkling) or "affusion" (pouring) rather than by immersion.
 - a. However, the Bible teaches that children are innocent, safe (Ezek 18:20; 1 John 3:4; Mark 10:14).
 - (1). Baptism must be preceded by hearing and believing the gospel, repentance of sins, confession of Christ, and then one can be baptized (Rom 10:17; Mark 16:15,16; Acts 2:38; Rom 10:8-10).
 - (2). In the New Testament "men and women" were baptized (Acts 8:12).
 - b. The Bible also teaches that baptism is a burial (immersion) only (Mark 1:9-11; Col 2:12; Rom 6:4; Acts 8:36-39). This is why John the Baptist was baptizing where there was "much water" (John 2:23).
3. Presbyterians believe in salvation by grace alone through faith alone.
 - a. The Bible says that faith alone will not save (Jas 2:14-26).
 - b. We must do (obey) what the Lord commands us to do (Luke 6:46; Matt 7:21; Heb 5:8-9).
 - c. Salvation from sin comes through faith in Jesus Christ, repentance, confessing Christ as the Son of God, and by being baptized into Christ for the remission of sins (John 3:16, 36; Mark 16:16; Luke 13:3; Rom 10:10; Acts 2:38; 22:16; 1 Pet 3:21; Rom 6:4).
4. The Presbyterian Church uses instrumental music in worship, even though John Calvin condemned it.

- a. Calvin stated: ". . .the Papists, as I shall have occasion to show elsewhere, in employing instrumental music cannot be said so much to imitate the practice of God's ancient people as to ape it in a senseless and absurd manner, exhibiting a silly delight in that worship of the Old Testament which was *figurative* and terminated with the gospel."²
 - b. There is one branch of the Presbyterians, the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America, which opposes instrumental music in the worship and sings psalms congregationally.
 - c. In the New Testament, Christians worshipped by singing without the use of instrumental accompaniment (Eph 5:19; Col 3:16; 1 Cor 14:15).
5. Presbyterians are "open-minded" on abortion.
- a. The latest major statement on abortion by a Presbyterian General Assembly came in 1992, which said:
 - (1). ". . .There is [both] agreement and disagreement on the basic issue of abortion. The committee [on problem pregnancies and abortion] agreed that there are no biblical texts that speak expressly to the topic of abortion, but that taken in their totality the Holy Scriptures are filled with messages that advocate respect for the woman and child before and after birth. Therefore the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) encourages an atmosphere of open debate and mutual respect for a variety of opinions concerning the issues related to problem pregnancies and abortion."³
 - b. However, the Bible is rather clear about the sinful nature of abortion (Exo 21:22-25; Prov 6:16-17; Amos 1:13; Jer 1:5).
6. Presbyterians are opposed to the death penalty.

² Calvin's Comments on Ps. xcii. 1. <http://www.swrb.com/newslett/actualNLS/instcalv.htm>

³ <http://www.pcusa.org/101/101-abortion.htm>

- a. In 1978 the General Assembly went on record as saying:
 - (1). "Capital punishment is an expression of vengeance which contradicts the justice of God on the cross."⁴
- b. The Bible makes it abundantly clear that the government has the God-given right to take the lives of evil people (Rom 13:1-8; Eccl 8:11).

II. Calvinism (TULIP) vs. the Bible

A. **T = Total Heredity Depravity** (also known as the doctrine of "original sin"):

1. Calvinists teach: "People in their natural, unregenerate state do not have the ability to turn to God. Rather it is the grace and will of God through the Spirit that causes men who are dead in sin to be reborn through the Word."⁵
2. Calvinists generally offer the following scriptures to support the belief that we are all born in sin: (Gen 6:5; Jer 31:29; John 6:44; Rom 3:10; Eph 2:1-3; Rom 5:18-19; Psa 51:5).
3. The Bible, however, denies the concept of "Total Heredity Depravity" (Original Sin), and in fact teaches just the opposite. We are born sinless (Deut 1:39-40; Ezek 18:20; 28:15; Jer 19:2-4; Matt 19:13-14).
4. Since Calvinists believe children are born in sin (having inherited the sin of Adam), then God must provide salvation.
 - a. However, the Calvinists concept of salvation is far from what the Bible teaches.
 - b. In fact, they believe God chooses only certain people to be saved, and others to remain in a lost condition.

B. **U = Unconditional Election and Predestination:**

1. Calvinists teach: "By the decree of God, for the manifestation of his glory, some men and angels are predestined to life, and others

⁴ http://www.pcusa.org/101/101-capital.htm#N_4_.

⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Five_points_of_Calvinism#Total_depravity

foreordained to everlasting death. These angels and men, thus predestined and foreordained, are particularly and unchangeably designed: And their number is so certain and definite that it cannot be either increased or decreased."⁶

2. To support this doctrine, Calvinists generally offer the following passages: (Exod 33:19; John 1:11-13; Eph 1:3-6; Rom 8:29-30).
3. There are many passages in both the Old and New Testaments that prove beyond any doubt that God's character and His divine nature prevent Him from choosing some to receive the gift of salvation while denying it to others: (Josh 24:15; Acts 10:34-35; Gal 2:6; Acts 2:38-39; Mark 16:15-16; 2 Pet 3:9).
4. Unfortunately, the false doctrine of "Unconditional Election and Predestination" leads to the false doctrine of "Limited Atonement."
 - a. If God specifically chose and predestined certain individuals to be saved and others lost, then we would also have to believe that the atoning blood of Jesus Christ is not for everyone.
 - b. In other words, we would be forced to conclude that Jesus only shed His blood for the benefit of those whom God foreordained and predestined.

C. L = Limited Atonement:

1. John Calvin taught that atonement was sufficient for all, but efficient only for the elect⁷ – meaning Jesus died for all men, but in reality His death will save only a few.
2. Calvinists offer the following scriptures to support this belief: (John 10:14-15; John 17:9; Eph 5:25).
3. There are numerous passages that clearly show Jesus did not die on the cross just for those whom God foreordained and predestined to be saved. He died to redeem the whole world from sin: (1 John 2:2; 1 Tim 2:5-6; Heb 2:9; 1 Tim 2:3-4; 2 Pet 3:9; Titus 2:11).

⁶ *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter III, pp. 1-7.

⁷ Walter L. Lingle, *Presbyterians: Their History and Beliefs*, John Knox Press, March 7, 1944, p. 41.

4. However, if God foreordained and predestined specific persons to be saved while others were predestined to be lost; and if the atoning blood of Jesus Christ is limited only to those whom God as predestined to be saved; then we would be forced to believe in Calvin's belief of "Irresistible Grace."
 - a. This simply means those whom God has chosen cannot resist the power of the Holy Spirit in leading them to salvation.
- D. **I = Irresistible Grace:**
1. Calvinist teach: "This effectual call is of God's free and special grace alone, not from anything at all foreseen in man, who is altogether passive therein, until, being quickened and renewed by the Holy Spirit, he is thereby enabled to answer this call, and to embrace the grace offered and conveyed in it."⁸
 2. Scriptures offered by Calvinists to support this doctrine include: (John 6:37, 44, 65; Rom 8:28-30).
 3. There are many scriptures that refute the false doctrine of "Irresistible Grace" including: (Titus 2:11-13; Acts 6:10; 7:51-53; Rev 22:17; Matt 11:28-30).
 4. However, if one accepts the Calvinistic teachings that God foreordained and predestined certain individuals to be saved and others lost through "Unconditional Election and Predestination"; and if the blood of Jesus Christ provides "Limited Atonement" only for those whom God has elected to be saved; and if God has extended His "Irresistible Grace" only to those who are destined to be atoned by the blood of Christ, and they alone have been "quickened and renewed by the Holy Spirit"; then it only stands to reason that God would not allow those whom He has foreordained and predestined to be saved to somehow lose their salvation. Thus we have the final false doctrine of Calvinism which is a natural outcome of all the false teaching before it – namely, the "Perseverance of the Saints," or "once saved, always saved."

⁸ *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Article 10.2

E. P = Perseverance of the Saints:

1. Calvinists teach "They, whom God hath accepted in his beloved, effectually called, and sanctified by his Spirit, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace, but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved."⁹
 - a. The typical view of Calvinists about "Perseverance of the Saints" is seen in the following outlandish statement: "If I killed my wife and mother and debauched a thousand women I couldn't go to hell – in fact, I couldn't go to hell if I wanted to."¹⁰
2. Calvinist offer the following scriptures in an effort to support this false teaching: (John 5:24; 6:37-39; Jude 24; Rom 8:31-37; 11:29).
3. There are numerous scriptures to refute the false teaching of the "Perseverance of the Saints" including: (Gal 5:4; Acts 8:20-23; Rom 12:1-2; Heb 6:1-12; Rev 3:4-6; 1 Cor 10:12-13; 2 Pet 1:5-11; 2:20-2; Heb 3:12-15).

Conclusion:

- I. Calvinism makes a mockery of the gospel plan of salvation by saying God saves some in an irresistible way, while condemning others to an eternal hell despite any longings they may have for salvation.
 - A. What kind of God would damn forever those who never had a chance at salvation?
 1. What kind of God would give life to precious souls, allow them to grow into adulthood, tease them with the preaching of the gospel of Christ, and then condemn them to an eternal hell because they were not among those whom He foreordained and predestined to be saved?
 2. Calvinism not only makes a mockery of the grace, mercy and loving-kindness of God, it makes the God of heaven into an unloving, unmerciful tyrant who truly is a respecter of persons.

⁹ *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Article 17.1

¹⁰ Bill Foster, *The Weekly Worker*, March 12, 1959 (Baptist Preacher, Louisville, Ky).

3. If God had already determined those who will be saved, then what purpose is there for preaching the gospel to the whole world?
 4. Furthermore, Calvinism makes many of the parables of Jesus pointless in claiming God saves those whom He chooses and eternally and forever preserves those whom He has saved from ever being lost – including the parables of "The Sower" (Matthew 13:3-23); "Wheat and the Tares" (Matt 13:24-43); "The Lost Sheep" (Luke 15:4-7); "The Lost Coin" (Luke 15:8-10); "The Prodigal Son" (Luke 15:11-32); "The Faithful Servant and the Foolish Servant" (Luke 12:34-48), just to mention a few.
- II. Calvinism is as close as modern-day denominational preachers can get to the Gnostic doctrine of the Nicolaitans which the Lord condemned twice in the New Testament.
- A. The Nicolaitans were one of the heretical sects that plagued the churches at Ephesus and at Pergamum, and perhaps elsewhere.
1. Irenaeus¹¹ identified the Nicolaitans as a Gnostic sect. He wrote: "John, the disciple of the Lord, preaches this faith (the deity of Christ), and seeks, by the proclamation of the Gospel, to remove that error which by Cerinthus had been disseminated among men, and a long time previously by those termed Nicolaitans, who are an offset of that 'knowledge' falsely so called, that he might confound them, and persuade them that there is but one God, who made all things by His Word."¹²
 2. There is also historical evidence of a Gnostic sect called Nitolaitans a century or so later.
- B. Their doctrine appears to have been a form of antinomianism.
1. *Antinomianism*: belief that is based upon a recognition of the mercy of God as the ground of salvation, but it makes the fatal mistake that man can freely partake in sin because the Law of God is no longer binding.

¹¹ Irenaeus (130-202 AD)

¹² Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, iii 11. 1; ANF vol. 1, p. 426

2. Nicolaitans of the 2nd century seem to have continued and extended the views of the 1st century adherents, teaching that the deeds in the flesh had no effect upon the spirit, and would not affect ones salvation – which is just another way of saying "once saved, always saved."
 3. However, the Bible teaches that Christians are supposed to die to sin and the deeds of our flesh (Rom 6:1-4, 11-14)
- C. No wonder Jesus condemned the doctrine of the Nicolaitans twice in the book of Revelation (Rev 2:6, 15-16).
1. Every follower of Jesus Christ should likewise hate anything that is even remotely associated with the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, such as Calvinism, for neither are from God, and both lead men into error.
 4. While the Bible teaches that we are saved by "grace through faith (Eph 2:8-9), the apostle Paul also adds, "for we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them." (Eph 2:10)
 5. We should always remember the words of Peter and live by this standard: (2 Pet 1:10-11).

Study Questions:

1. Who are the two men mainly responsible for the Presbyterian Church?
2. What does the word "Presbyterian" mean and where did it come from?
3. Do Presbyterians have a Scriptural form of government? Why or why not?

7. Presbyterians claim capital punish is contrary to the teachings of the Bible? What does the Bible say on the subject?
8. Why was John Calvin opposed to instrumental music in worship?