

The Presbyterian Handbook

Revised Edition



Geneva Press
Louisville, Kentucky

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PREFACE

Please Be Advised:

Lots of books, pamphlets, and booklets have been written through the centuries as companions for average folks who wanted help navigating their way through a complicated subject. *The Boy Scout Handbook* comes to mind, for example. So do *The American Red Cross First Aid and Safety Handbook*, *Tune and Repair Your Own Piano: A Practical and Theoretical Guide to the Tuning of All Keyboard Stringed Instruments*, and *National Audubon Society's Field Guide to North American Reptiles and Amphibians*. They stand as testimony to the average person's need for a guide to both the vast truths and complex detail that make up a particular area of interest. These books turn complicated, inaccessible ideas into simple, easy-to-understand concepts and, if necessary, into action steps that are easy to follow.

Likewise, *The Presbyterian Handbook* follows this format. Here, you will discover a combination of reliable, historical, and theological information alongside some fun facts and very practical tips on being a churchgoing follower of Jesus Christ, all presented in that oh-so-Presbyterian, down-to-earth, tongue-in-cheek sort of way.

You will also discover that this book is intended for learning and enjoyment. (Some Presbyterians have trouble doing the latter until they've first suffered through the former.) It's meant to spur conversation, to inform and edify, and to make you laugh. Think of the book as a comedian with a dry sense of humor and a degree in theology. It can be used in the classroom with students or at the dinner table with family or in solitude.

But however you use it, use it! It's printed on paper that accepts either ink or pencil nicely, so feel free to write and highlight in it (and there's room for notes in the back).

Anyway, the point is this: Being a follower of Jesus is hard enough without having to navigate the faith journey—let alone the maze of church culture—all alone. Sooner or later everyone needs a companion.

—THE EDITORS

CHURCH STUFF

Every well-prepared Presbyterian should have a basic understanding of Presbyterian teachings and where they came from.

Plus, since every church goes about worship in a slightly different way, it might take a little time to get the hang of things—especially if you're new to a congregation.

This section includes:

- Essential facts about the Presbyterian faith. (If you know these things, you'll know more than most.)
- Practical advice for singing hymns, taking Communion, and getting to know the people in your congregation.
- Hints for enjoying worship—even when you're having a bad day.

HOW TO BE A VISITOR

Where else does one get an hour of entertainment absolutely free? Go to worship! No reservation needed!

Whether you come from another church tradition or have no church experience at all, approach a new church like you would enter any foreign culture: with respect, patience, and a good attitude.

❶ **Go with an open mind.**

No two worship services are alike. The prayers, songs, and litanies will vary from church to church. They say most people enjoy approximately 60 percent of worship and hate the other 40 percent. The problem is your favorite part is probably someone else's worst moment. Look around and see who is enjoying the parts you don't enjoy.

❷ **Dress respectfully.**

Churches don't have dress codes and worshipers today are much less formal than previous generations. However, before putting on your shorts and flip-flops, check out the church's website to see how people dress. Try and blend in if you can. Of course, if you have few clothes, wear whatever you have. God doesn't have a dress code, and you'll be fine.

❸ **Be on time.**

Check the website, the sign in front of the church, or call before to find out when worship begins. Plan to arrive ten minutes early to find a place to sit and get oriented. Most churches have worship bulletins that explain what

will happen and when. Often there is music playing before to get you in the mood. Again, free.

④ Introduce yourself.

Meeting new people is just as uncomfortable for the visitor as for the member. Going to church doesn't change this. Feel free to take the initiative and introduce yourself to others.

⑤ Bring your children.

Presbyterians welcome children to worship. Call before or arrive early to see if there are any expectations or activities for children. Some churches have quiet activity packets for small children. Others invite children to participate in the first part of the service and then lead them to another area for children's activities, respecting children's shorter attention spans.

⑥ Relax and enjoy the experience.

Worship is celebrating God's presence in our lives and responding in gratitude. There is no blueprint for how to best do this. So sit back and see how this group does it. Go home and consider if you wish to return.

Note: *Liturgy* comes from the Greek word meaning "work of the people." Sometimes worship may seem like a chore. Just remember, the part you don't enjoy may be someone else's favorite moment.

HOW TO USE A WORSHIP BULLETIN

Many Presbyterian congregations offer a printed resource called a bulletin to assist worshipers. The bulletin may contain the order of the service, liturgical information, music listings, the day's Bible readings, and important community announcements.

1 Arrive early.

A few extra minutes before worship will allow you to scan the bulletin and prepare for the service.

2 Receive the bulletin from the usher.

Upon entering the worship space, an usher will give you a bulletin. Some congregations stack bulletins near the entrance for self-service.

3 Review the order of worship.

When seated, open the bulletin and find the order of the service, usually printed on the first or second page. Some churches print the entire service in the bulletin so that worshipers don't have to switch back and forth between worship aids.

4 Determine if other worship resources are required.

The order of worship may specify additional hymnals, song sheets, candles, or other external supplies required during the service.

5 Fill out the attendance card.

A card may be located inside the bulletin or somewhere in your row. Fill it out completely. You may be asked to pass this card to an usher or to place it in the offering plate. Some congregations have visitors/Communion attendance books for people to sign.

6 Reflect on bulletin artwork.

Covers often feature a drawing or design that corresponds to the season of the church year or the day's Bible verses. Examine the artwork and make a note of its connection to the lessons or sermon.

7 Track your worship progress.

The bulletin will guide you through the liturgy, hymns, and lessons as you worship and let you know where you are at all times.

8 Watch for liturgical dialogues.

The bulletin may contain spoken parts of the liturgy not found in the hymnal. The worship leader's parts may be marked with a "P:" or "L:". The congregation's responses may be marked with a "C:" and are often printed in boldface type.

9 Identify the worship leaders and assistants.

The names of ushers, musicians, greeters, readers, acolytes, and pastors can usually be found in the bulletin. Greet these people by name following the service. Make good eye contact.

10 Review the printed announcements.

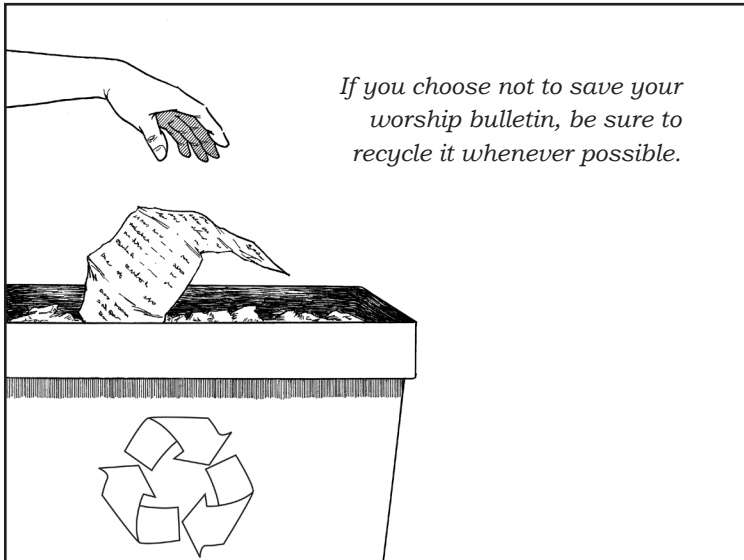
Community activities, calendars, and updates are often listed in the back of the bulletin. Scan listings during the prelude music, the offering, or the spoken announcements.

11 Make good use of the bulletin after the service.

Some congregations re-use bulletins for later services. Return the bulletin if possible. Recycling bins may also be provided. If you wish, or unless otherwise instructed, you may take the bulletin home with you.

Be Aware

- Bulletins often use letter or color codes to signify which hymnals should be used. Look for a key or legend that details this information.
- Many church secretaries and worship committees need help preparing the bulletin each week. You may want to volunteer to copy, fold, or assemble the bulletin for an upcoming service.
- Bulletins provide instructions on when the congregation should stand and sit. Many bulletins will also indicate that “when able.” This is to recognize the needs of those who are unable to stand. It also reminds us that true participation in worship does not depend on either standing or sitting. The goal is for all God’s children to worship God in the midst of the congregation.



*If you choose not to save your
worship bulletin, be sure to
recycle it whenever possible.*

HOW TO RECEIVE THE LORD'S SUPPER

The sacrament of the Lord's Supper is a central act of worship in Presbyterian churches. It is an outward and visible sign and seal of the promises God makes in the gospel of Jesus Christ. These promises are received by faith as church members eat the bread and drink the wine, representing Jesus' body and blood (1 Corinthians 11:23–26). The sacrament nourishes faith of believers in the church community and unites Presbyterians with all other Christians.

- The Lord's Supper is also called Communion or the Eucharist.
- The “elements” of the Lord's Supper are the bread and the wine.

The bread may be a loaf of bread or individual pieces of bread.

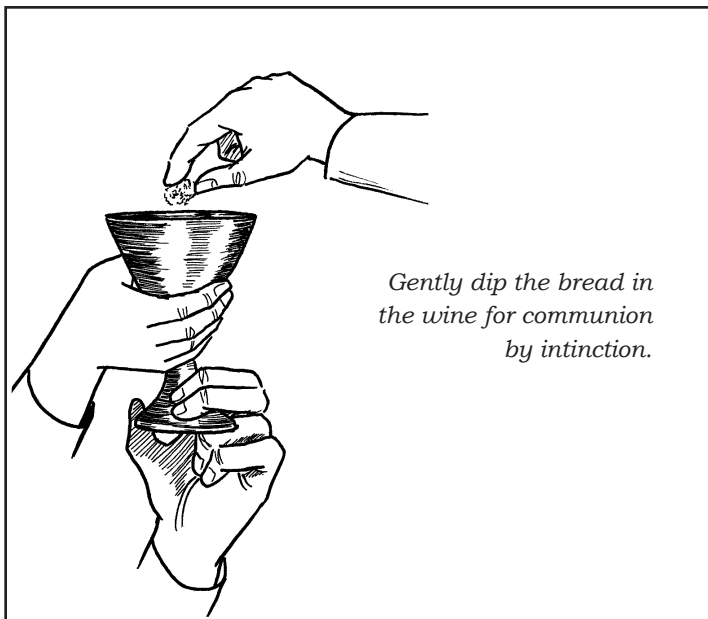
The wine (usually grape juice) may be used from a common cup or individual cups.

❶ **Key Ideas in the Lord's Supper**

1. **Covenant.** We join others in the church as the people of God who have received the “new covenant” in Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 11:25).
2. **Remembrance.** We remember Jesus' death and resurrection (1 Corinthians 11:24) and by faith receive the benefits of all that Jesus has done for us (John 6:53–58).
3. **Reign of God.** We celebrate the return of Jesus and the coming reign of God (1 Corinthians 11:26).

② Different Ways of Celebrating the Lord's Supper.

1. Elders distribute the elements so that we receive the bread and wine while seated in the pew from the person seated next to us.
2. The congregation proceeds to the front of the church and receives the elements from a pastor or an elder. Then,
 - the bread and the wine may be received separately.
 - the bread may be dipped into a cup of wine (called "intinction").
3. Groups from the congregation may proceed to tables in the front of the church and be served the elements.



PRESBYTERIAN ORIGINS

① Reformed Churches

Presbyterians are part of the whole household of Christians. We are part of a family called Reformed churches. These churches began in the sixteenth century at the time of the Protestant Reformation. They were churches that looked especially to the teachings of Huldrych Zwingli of Zurich (1484–1531) and John Calvin (1509–1564), who lived in Geneva, Switzerland, as being reliable ways of understanding and interpreting the Bible. Other Reformed leaders followed. They wanted to “reform” the Roman Catholic Church on the basis of the Word of God in Scripture.

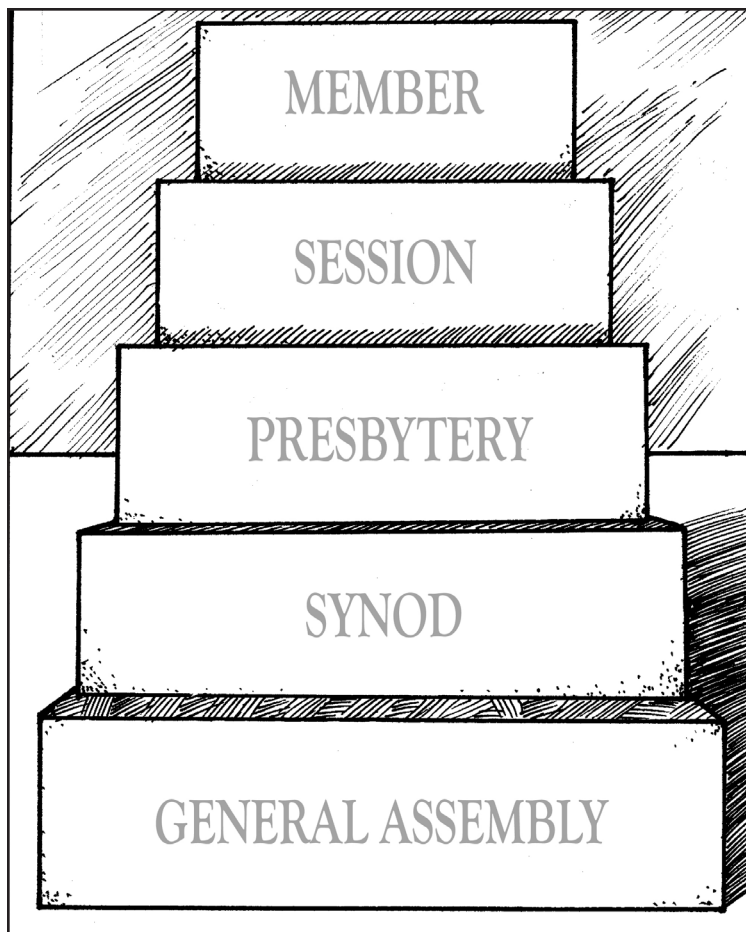
② Protestant Churches

Reformed churches became distinguished from Lutheran churches, which followed the teachings of Martin Luther (1483–1546), who had also sought the “reformation” of the Roman Catholic Church. Reformed churches also followed a different path from those who became known as Anabaptists (today’s Baptists, Mennonites, and others) since Anabaptists believed that only adults who profess their faith in Christ and not infants should be baptized. Lutheran, Reformed, and Anabaptists are all “Protestants” in that they do not agree with the Roman Catholic Church. In England, Anglican churches (Episcopal churches in the United States today) emerged as a middle way between Catholicism and Protestantism.

③ Presbyterian Churches

Presbyterian Churches get their name from their form of church government: government by presbyters or

elders. The primary governing unit is the presbytery, which is composed of clergy (teaching elders) and elected lay leaders (ruling elders) in a specific geographical area. The ruling elders who govern in local churches are called the session.



THE PRESBYTERIAN FAMILY IN THE UNITED STATES

Thousands of Presbyterians emigrated from Europe and came to the New World in the seventeenth century and later. Presbyterians were prominent in the country that became the United States during the time of the American Revolution. A Presbyterian clergyman, John Witherspoon, signed the Declaration of Independence.

Today there are a number of Presbyterian denominations in the United States. These emerged from theological differences within the “Presbyterian family.”

- Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church
- Bible Presbyterian Church
- Cumberland Presbyterian Church
- Evangelical Presbyterian Church
- Orthodox Presbyterian Church
- Presbyterian Church in America
- Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)
- Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America
- Second Cumberland Presbyterian Church in the United States

HOW TO UNDERSTAND THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE LAW AND GRACE

Presbyterians believe in both the law of God and the grace of God. These themes are found throughout the Bible in both the Old and the New Testament. The law is not confined to the Old Testament; and grace is not confined to the New Testament. Each is found in the whole Bible, and each is important for the Christian. Presbyterians affirm both as good gifts from God.

1 The Purpose of Law

The law of God is expressed in the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20). God gave the Torah (Law) to the people of Israel to show them how God wanted them to live. They were not to worship idols, not to steal, to honor their parents, remember the Sabbath day, and so forth. The ceremonial and dietary laws in the Old Testament were the specific forms God desired to help the people live in accord with God's will in obedience. So law is good. The Psalms see the law as a blessing to be loved and treasured (see Psalm 119). The people of Israel were to obey God's law as an expres-



sion of obedience and gratitude for God's love and liberation from their slavery in Egypt. The law is introduced by the command to remember that God had saved the people (Exodus 20:2).

② **The Purpose of the Gospel**

The gospel is the “good news” of Jesus Christ. Presbyterians believe that God has become a person in Jesus Christ to provide salvation or a restored relationship with God for those who believe in Christ (John 3:1–16). We believe in Jesus Christ by faith, the gift of the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 2:8–9). Human sin has caused a rupture in the relationship God intends to have with humans. Due to sin, humans do not want to obey God's law or seek God's will—we want to live life “my way,” instead of “God's way.” So God has come in Jesus Christ to provide a way of forgiving sin and reconciling us to the God who created us and loves us. Since we cannot obey God's law and “gain” salvation by our own efforts, God provides a way of salvation in Jesus Christ—and this is the purpose of the gospel.

③ **Law and Gospel; Gospel and Law**

Presbyterians believe that we receive salvation by God's grace—as an undeserved gift, by faith in Jesus Christ. We do not try to keep the law to gain salvation or a reconciled relationship with God, by “good works.” Instead, we believe in Jesus Christ as God's Son who died for our sins (Romans 5:8) and receive the benefits of Christ's life, death, and resurrection. So we are saved by Jesus Christ in the gospel.

But the moral law—the Ten Commandments—still plays a vital role in the Christian life, according to Presbyterians. When we are reconciled to God, we

seek to obey God's will as an expression of love and obedience and gratitude to God. We learn God's will through God's law. We see in the law the kind of people God wants us to be. So the law is our guide to living an obedient, faithful Christian life. We obey God's law out of gratitude—not as a means to *gain* salvation, but as an *expression of* salvation. We obey God's law joyfully, in gratitude as we find our salvation in Jesus Christ by faith (Romans 5:1).



KEY PRESBYTERIAN CONCEPTS

Chapter 2 of the *Book of Order* of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) names the following themes that have been especially important for Reformed churches:

- **Sovereignty.** God is the majestic, holy God who creates, sustains, rules, and redeems the world. God's providence is God's guidance and work in history and in the lives of individuals.
- **Election.** God saves a people to serve God and carry out God's purposes in the world through lives of faithful obedience to Jesus Christ.
- **Covenant.** God enters into a relationship with people: Israel in the Old Testament; the church in the New Testament. They are the people of God who proclaim and seek to order their lives by God's Word.
- **Stewardship.** The people of God manage God's gifts responsibly and seek to make proper use of the good gifts of God's creation.
- **Sin.** Humans are prone to idolatry, which is worshipping anything other than God, and tyranny by which the very fabric of human life and relationships are broken.
- **Obedience.** The people of God work for justice and social transformation as expressions of their obedience to God's Word and will in Jesus Christ.

PRESBYTERIAN GOVERNMENT

The term *polity* means “government” and Presbyterian polity is the form of government by which the church operates.

① The Constitution

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is governed by a constitution. It has two parts.

Book of Confessions. The doctrinal statements that convey what the church believes.

Book of Order. The policies and procedures of the church to enable it to carry out its ministries.

② The Governing Structures

The church is governed by representatives and has a graduated system of governing bodies.

These are sometimes seen to correspond to the structures of the U.S. government.

<u>Church</u>	<u>U.S.A.</u>
Session	City
Presbytery	County
Synod	State
General Assembly	National

TIPS ON INTERPRETING THE *BOOK OF CONFESSIONS*

The creeds and confessions in the *Book of Confessions* span many centuries—from the early church to the contemporary period. As we seek to interpret what these documents are saying, we need to understand the historical and cultural contexts in which the confessions were written, as well as the theological understandings they are conveying.

One example of this is the male-oriented language of many confessional documents. We recognize today that in many instances from earlier times, the term *men* is used to include males and females. So we must interpret older confessions in this light.

Here are some tips for interpreting the *Book of Confessions*.

- Focus on the gospel of Jesus Christ as the main theme of the confessions.
The confessions, like Scripture, point us to Jesus Christ.
- Interpret the confessions in light of their historical and cultural contexts.
Some Reformation confessions prohibit women from baptizing; this reflects the historical context of opposition to Roman Catholicism. This prohibition does not carry validity today.
- The Holy Spirit leads us to further and clearer understandings of Scripture and the *Book of Confessions*.

The church has and will reinterpret, amend, and add to the *Book of Confessions* as the Holy Spirit leads.

- The major themes throughout the *Book of Confessions* are the rule of faith.

The great, overarching themes of Christian faith, the Protestant Reformation, and the Reformed tradition are the elements that are most central to our Presbyterian faith.

- Studying the whole *Book of Confessions* is an important and helpful activity for Presbyterians.
- The documents of the *Book of Confessions* are a rich treasury to nurture our faith in Jesus Christ and help us grow in our theological understandings.