

Being Presbyterian

What makes us Presbyterian? Does being a Presbyterian make one a different sort of Christian? What can one expect when one joins a Presbyterian Church?

First of all we need to understand what the Bible teaches about being church. The Scriptures tell about the *universal* church and the *local* church. The universal church is a living organism: is it the body of the Lord Jesus Christ which transcends the limitations of time, space, languages, and nations. Only God knows the number of this Church as He ordained the names of the elect to be included into the Book of Life from before the beginning of time in the Lord Jesus Christ.

The local church is an institutionalised expression of the universal church: it is confined by time and space. When a church is “planted” it receives a structure. Members group together to form a congregation and leaders (elders) are elected to govern it and exercise discipline according to the Word of God. The names appearing on the rolls of a local church do not necessarily reflect the number of God’s elect; some names might appear because of error in human judgement.

In the Presbyterian system the local churches group together to form Presbyteries, and Presbyteries group together to form an Assembly. This grouping together gives expression to the unity of the Church of Jesus Christ.

There are a few distinctives being Presbyterian. The emphasis however for Presbyterians in the first place is not to overstress the distinctives of their denomination as if being Presbyterian provides the only passport to heaven. It might surprise some Presbyterians that people from other denominations who put their faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, accepting the authority of the Scriptures and living lives pleasing to God are *also* God’s children.

Living faith in Jesus Christ is therefore the foremost prerequisite of being a Presbyterian. Christian first, then Presbyterian!

How we interpret the Bible is articulated in the [Westminster Confession of Faith](#). Elders (preaching and teaching) vow to uphold these standards.

Members of the Presbyterian Church, by accepting the presbyterial form of [church government](#) and practice, order their church life according to these principles. Presbyterians differ from Episcopalian churches (like the Anglican and Roman Churches) in church government. We also do things differently from those in churches with a congregational form of church government (e.g. the Churches of Christ and Pentecostal Churches in general).

We therefore don’t have final authority vested in singular bishops or priests; we have Sessions made up of a number of elders. We further differ from congregational churches who believe the final say of what is done in a local church depends on the voice of the majority of the members. We subject to the leadership of duly elected elders, who are called to live exemplary lives according to the Scriptures. They subject themselves to the authority of Christ and his infallible Word and rule the congregation according to rules agreed upon by the General Assemblies. Their sphere of authority is limited to the local church, but they desire to give expression to the unity of the denomination by involvement in and submission to the higher courts of the denomination, namely the Presbytery and the Assembly. We

understand that the sphere of authority of the higher courts is not unbounded; there are certain aspects of church government which pertains to the local church only, while other aspects of government can only be exercised within the Presbytery and Assembly respectively. This demarcation of jurisdiction assures broad Presbyterian uniformity, while avoiding the pitfalls of drab uniformity.

Every Presbyterian congregation should therefore manifest certain distinctives of “Presbyterian DNA”, though without local congregations being endlessly reproduced clones of one another.

Being Presbyterian therefore means that congregations are neither independent, nor are they just part of a hierarchical system where there is no room for local expression. We accept that we are part of a denomination: we show *loyalty* to the denomination by adhering to decisions of the higher courts and the practices of the denomination. This loyalty implies that congregational individuality should not be at the expense of denominational unity.

What is the application of what I have written about in this article? Amongst other things the following:

- *Adherence to the doctrinal standards of the denomination:* What we believe as Presbyterians is contained in the Bible as the only rule for worship and practice. *How* we understand *what* the Bible teaches is encapsulated in the Westminster Confession of Faith. Deviations from this leads to a house divided, sure to fall.
- *Loyalty to our denomination:* It is expected that we pray for and support institutions, organisations, activities and personnel of our church. Missionaries employed and endorsed by the Committee for World Evangelisation and Mission Partners should be our first support priority. Praying for and showing interest in the work of the theological Colleges, care institutions and the schools under the oversight of the Presbyterian Church of Australia is the concern of all Presbyterians in Australia.
- *Respect for and allegiance to the courts of the Church:* Prayer for the meetings of Assemblies, Presbyteries and Session is essential. Office bearers must be diligent in attending these meetings and abiding by its rules and decisions; they vowed before God to do so.
- *Maintaining Presbyterian identity:* It is true that no two congregations are clones of one another; yet, the tendency to be individual may lead to the acceptance of the congregational principles of church government completely foreign to the presbyterial form of church government. Not all Australians know what “Presbyterian” means, but a vast majority knows about the work of this church. Not all may know what a “ministry” is, but all know what a church is. Not all may know what a “worship centre” is, but the majority will know where to find the church building.
- *Expression of unity:* It is a sad thing when neighbouring Presbyterian congregations can’t work together; instead they compete with one another. We have to accept that not all of us can do everything well. But what one church excels in might be the next’s weak point. Working together can only be beneficial.

Let’s be proud of the fact that we have a wonderful and rich heritage. Our Presbyterian forefathers were willing to give their lives for the truth of the Gospel. Many died as Presbyterians on the mission fields of this world for the sake of Christ. Let us be loyal. Let us be Presbyterian!