

# What Does It Mean to Be Presbyterian?



What we believe at  
Fair Oaks Presbyterian Church

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## Introduction

What does it mean to be Presbyterian? And what does being Presbyterian have to do with Christian beliefs or the way a church is operated? These are good questions, especially in these days when we hear so much talk in religious circles, and even in the secular media, about the Presbyterian Church. It's fair to say that there are some significant debates and struggles in our present denomination, the Presbyterian Church (USA), particularly after the General Assembly of June, 2006. The issues can seem confusing and the talk has sometimes been heated. Folks from all walks of church life have voiced passionate, conflicting views.

Yet, we believe that there are primarily two basic, and very important, issues at the center of these debates and struggles: the person and work of Jesus Christ and the authority of Scripture.

Our hope is that with this informational booklet, we can share with you a bit about the history of our present denomination, and more important, some of the biblical and orthodox beliefs we embrace. This pamphlet is not meant to be a complete, authoritative accounting of our theology at Fair Oaks. Rather, our aim is to explain in simple terms our views on a few pivotal issues, and then also point you to some additional resources.

The Lord Jesus Christ alone is the author and finisher of our faith. To the extent that this booklet can help us clarify our beliefs more carefully, confess "Jesus is Lord" more boldly, and point others in love to Him more effectively, we give Him the glory.

## What We Believe About Being Christian

Going to church does not make someone a Christian, nor does belonging to a particular denomination. Why? Christianity is not a religion, but a relationship: A relationship with Jesus Christ. To be a Christian means, simply and profoundly, to be a follower of Christ. The word "Christian" is derived from the Greek word *christos*, or Christ, which means "anointed one". To call Jesus the "Christ", then, is already a kind of confession of faith. This truth leads to another: We believe that to be a follower of Jesus, one must also follow and accept what Jesus said about Himself. The idea may sound obvious, but even since the earliest days of the Christian church, many people have claimed to follow Christ but not believed that He is Messiah—the Son of God—fully human and fully divine.

At Fair Oaks Presbyterian Church, we hold to the biblical, orthodox beliefs about Jesus, including these: He is the second person of the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the names by which God has chosen to make Himself known. He is of the same substance as God the Father. He is both fully God and fully man. We confess, along with the saints through the ages, that “Jesus is Lord” and believe what He has said about Himself in Scripture, including, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6).

Following Jesus is more than doctrine. Following Jesus also means we invite Him to live in our hearts— to be the Lord of our lives. Our lives then take on the character of Christ and Jesus Himself lives and works through us incarnationally. According to Scripture, those who have given themselves to Jesus begin to assume His likeness. In other words, true followers of Christ behave like Christ (1 John). Jesus said that the world would know His disciples by their love. This biblical truth means that followers of Christ interact with the world around them in a way that He would: with a heart for people, having a godly perspective on sin (starting with our own), and putting love and compassion over all things.

## What We Believe About Orthodoxy

The notion that all a person needs to rightly interpret Scripture is “me, the Bible, and the Holy Spirit” may sound good, but it can be unhealthy and it’s not entirely scriptural. The view that a person or group can have unique scriptural insight that others don’t have can lead to the worse kinds of heresy. The same can be said of the notion that all interpretations of Scripture are equally valid. The proper and biblical way to interpret Scripture is through the lens of Scripture itself. But there’s another important step along the way, and we must go back into history to rediscover that well-worn and time-honored path.

Against Roman Catholic traditionalism, the Protestant reformers declared themselves as standing on “Scripture alone” (*sola scriptura*). This little phrase is one that believers may recognize even today, but many misunderstand it to mean that Christians should pay no attention to any source other than the Bible. In fact, Martin Luther and John Calvin made extensive use of the Tradition of the apostles and the writings of the early Church Fathers in their study of Scripture and in their reformation of the church. What *sola scriptura* really means is not “Scripture alone,” but rather “Scripture above all.”

“Scripture first” (*prima scriptura*) would, in truth, be a better slogan for the Protestant view that the Bible is the ultimate source for Christian faith and practice. This classic, historical approach suggests that ways of knowing and understanding God that do not originate from the Bible are in second place (say, for example, writings of the Church Fathers). It says these things may be helpful in interpreting Scripture, but they may be tested and corrected by the Bible if they

seem to contradict Scripture. Presbyterians have traditionally turned to two main sources for inspiration and guidance in their faith: The Bible, first, and then also to various creeds and confessions (including the classic creeds from the early church, as well as other, later creeds such as the Westminster Confession).

One of the ironies in the present debate in the PC(USA) is that some of the contentious points are not new at all. In fact, they are quite old. Here's another irony: These important theological matters were debated and settled long ago when the early Church Fathers battled valiantly against heresies that threatened to destroy the Christian movement. *Orthodox* means "right teaching." It was in a time not unlike our present day that early church leaders hammered out what it means to be orthodox: They lived in a non-Christian, pluralistic society where most any belief was tolerated and embraced. It was in that difficult, even hostile, environment that the apostles and Church Fathers worked out the details of our faith, in consensus, and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Chief among the issues were the authority of Scripture and the nature of the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Here's something else that may sound familiar: Some of the heretical teachings that the early Church Fathers battled against claimed that parts of the Bible were not inspired by God or weren't applicable to "modern" Christians. Early church leaders also fought against teachings alleging that Jesus was not entirely divine, or not entirely human, or was not the only way to God. Scripture is proven true again: "There is nothing new under the sun." Today, orthodox beliefs about Scripture and the nature of the person and work of Jesus Christ are being called into question and even ridiculed. Astonishingly, this even occurs within the church.

So, what are we to do when people calling themselves Christians deny foundational Christian beliefs such as the Trinity, or the two natures of Jesus Christ, under the banner of "contemporary relevance" or "fresh interpretation of Scripture"? We must return to our historic, classic, and orthodox Christian roots. The Church Fathers faced a similar situation with heretics who claimed to "prove" their own unorthodox heresies using Scripture. Not every interpretation of Scripture is equal. Some are unreasonable and some are opposed to what the universal Christian church has always believed. These interpretations are to be suspected of serious error.

## What We Believe About the Bible

Simply speaking, we believe about the Bible what the Bible says about itself: All Scripture is God-breathed— inspired by the living and unchanging God— and that because its origin is divine, its truths are divine. It is alive, it is powerful, and it is authoritative. We also believe that we don't have to "prove" the Bible, but hold that our calling as believers is to understand and live out the message of the Bible with the help of the Holy Spirit. It's also important to note that we

do not worship the Bible: We believe that the Bible is the record of the divine revelation of God and, as such, it points humankind to the person and work of Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. He is the object of our worship, not the Bible, for the starting place of faith is the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Often missed in the biblical debates over *orthodoxy* is its theological companion, *orthopraxy*, or “right practice”. Believers must not forget that Scripture has a practical purpose: namely, teaching and instruction so that Christians might be properly prepared for all good works (2 Tim 3:16-17). *Orthodoxy* and *orthopraxy* must go hand in hand. Both must be combined, for together they lead to the correct practice of loving others for the sake of Christ. One without the other leads to empty religion.

## What We Believe About Worship

Worship is the purpose of the church. Why? The answer begins with this foundational truth: *Because we were born to worship*. It is our reason for being. We must worship; we will worship something. We worship because that is how and why we were created.

Theologian A. W. Tozer has written: “One of the greatest tragedies that we find, even in this most enlightened of all ages, is the utter failure of millions of men and women ever to discover why they were born. Deny it if you will— and some persons will— but wherever there are humans in the world, there are people who are suffering from a hopeless and depressing kind of amnesia. It forces them to cry out, either silently within themselves or often with audible frustration, ‘I don’t even know why I was born!’

“Those who have followed the revelation provided by the Creator God have accepted that God never does anything without purpose. We do believe, therefore, that God had a noble purpose in mind when He created us. We believe that it was distinctly the will of God that men and women created in His image would desire fellowship with Him above all else. In His plan, it was to be a perfect fellowship based on adoring worship of the Creator and Sustainer of all things.”

Worship must be the church’s purpose, not only because it is our “chief end”, and not only because it reminds us why we exist, but because it is the very thing that we will continue to do for all time. Worship will never end. In the meantime, our response to the world around us— the world that God created— is our response in worship of Him. He is the Creator; we are the created.

Corporate worship on Sunday is a culminating act of a person’s private worship through the week— and the quality and depth of one affects the other. Corporate worship is the source of the church’s spirituality. Corporate worship produces fruit in the life of the church and the life of the believer. A church, or a believer, will wither and die on the vine if separated from authentic worship.

## What We Believe About the Church

The Bible uses several ways to describe the nature of the church. One well known example compares the church to a body: We believe that the members of the church form the Body of Christ. Together we are, as Scripture says using another metaphor, “living stones”. Together, we form the living church: a connected community of sinners committed to becoming mature disciples of Christ.

Here’s another vivid picture of the church: The church is the Bride of Christ. Our responsibility is to get ready for the coming of the Bridegroom, for some day, at God’s direction, Jesus Christ will return for His bride. In the meantime, our singular purpose is to worship and adore the Son and then go about the tasks He has given us to undertake. Those tasks include going to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...” (Matthew 28:19).

## What We Believe About Church Buildings

We believe that buildings and property are not the church but are merely tools. While it’s true that faithful people through the years labored and sacrificed to provide for what we have today, in a spiritual sense the buildings and property do not belong to us. Nor do they belong to any human organization or religious denomination. This idea is not to suggest that structures have no meaning, for buildings can be an obvious reminder of the visible unity and connective nature of the church. But, ultimately, church property is like all property: It belongs to God. Buildings are Kingdom resources over which we have present, temporary stewardship.

Like the tasks Jesus has given us to undertake, our stewardship of Kingdom resources is temporary—it will someday come to an end. This, then, is the reason that good stewards must go about their tasks with God-glorifying, Christ-centered, and Spirit-powered enthusiasm: We won’t go to heaven with “our” buildings or “our” money, for the only thing of value we’ll have in heaven will be crowns of glory. And we’ll be laying those at the feet of Christ.

## What We Believe About Being Presbyterian

Presbyterians are distinctive in at least two ways: We are supported by a framework of religious thought known as Reformed theology (a theology that, in part, focuses on the sovereignty of God and the importance of Scripture); and we have a form of government that emphasizes the active, representational leadership of church members.

In Presbyterian churches, governing authority is given to elected lay leaders known as “elders” (or “presbyters”) who work in close cooperation with the congregation’s pastors. For many, being Presbyterian has more to do with polity, governance, and the connective relationships among churches than with

specific, theological doctrines. There is no strict set of beliefs that unites all Presbyterians or separates them from other followers of Christ. A church, then, can be “Reformed” or even “Presbyterian” without belonging to a Presbyterian denomination.

## What We Believe About Denominations

In the postmodern world, denominations have become less important to many people, even as the doctrinal lines between them have become more blurred. Is there still a place for denominations in this day and age?

Believers have banded together in cooperative, like-minded groups called denominations for many years. Often times, churches choose to associate themselves in this way so that, together, their efforts in missions can be more significant and effective. This, for example, is why Baptists formed the Southern Baptist Convention in 1845: to combine missional resources so that the Gospel could be preached around the globe.

Presently, there are nine distinct Presbyterian denominations in America. Most are smaller, older, and are considered more evangelical—more theologically conservative—than our present denomination. Throughout the history of the Presbyterian Church in our country, there have been many splits and most occurred over debates on essential beliefs. In fact, after the founding of the first American Presbytery in 1706, the first separation occurred shortly thereafter, in 1729.

The Presbyterian Church (USA) is a relatively young organization: Fair Oaks has been affiliated with it since 1983, when the new denomination was formed as a result of a union between the Presbyterian Church in the U.S. (PCUS), called the “southern branch,” and the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. (UPCUSA), called the “northern branch.”

Ephesians 4:5 says that there is but one Church: “One Lord, one Faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all.” Denominations are a human invention and, according to our own *Book of Order*, while they “do not destroy [the unity of the church], they do obscure it for both the Church and the world.” We believe that denominational affiliation can be an effective tool for building God’s Kingdom, but it must never become an obstacle to doing so. Doctrine is certainly important, and polity is as well. But if a denomination becomes an obstruction to the unity of the Body of Christ, it will have lost its Kingdom effectiveness.

## For Additional Information

If you'd like to learn more about the historic, orthodox beliefs we hold about the person and work of Jesus Christ, the Bible, or other related topics, we recommend these resources:

### ***Available from Fair Oaks Presbyterian Church for a small fee:***

*About Being Presbyterian... A Guide to More Effective Church Membership* (Channing L. Bete Co., Inc., 1974). An illustrated, 15-page pamphlet that serves as a simple, introductory guide.

*The Book of Confessions* (Copyright © 1999 by the Office of the General Assembly; Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)) This is part of the official constitution (Part I) of the PCUSA.

*The Book of Order* (Copyright © 2005 by the Office of the General Assembly; Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)) This is part of the official constitution (Part II) of the PCUSA.

*The History of the Presbyterian Church* (15-page pamphlet, © 1974 Channing L. Bete Co., Inc). An illustrated, 15-page pamphlet that serves as a simple, introductory guide.

### ***Available from Fair Oaks Presbyterian Church library:***

The media center/library at Fair Oaks has a number of excellent reference materials on the issues in this pamphlet ranging from history to apologetics. We recommend that you take some time to browse and find something interesting to check out of the library next time you're at church.

### ***Available Free Online:***

Note: The sites listed here are provided as a service and do not necessarily constitute an endorsement. While care has been taken to select them, FOPC is not responsible for the content of these sites.

Creeds and Confessions of the Presbyterian Church: <http://creeds.net/reformed/creeds.htm>

Miscellaneous Writings and Materials Concerning Reformed Theology: <http://www.reformed.org/index.html>

Numerous Links to Presbyterian-Related Sites (e.g. PCUSA, Presbyterian Coalition, and New Wineskins Association of Churches): <http://www.layman.org/layman/Links/links.htm>