

Discernment – The Gospel – Presbyterianism

EVANGELICAL OVERVIEW

Over the past three weeks, we have explored the doctrines of Catholicism, Anglicanism, Methodism, and Lutheranism. Next on our list is Presbyterianism.

PRESBYTERIANISM - REFORMED

The previously discussed forms of Protestantism followed in the vein of Martin Luther, King Henry VIII, Jacobus Arminius, and John Wesley. However, the beginning of Presbyterianism as a distinct movement occurred during the 16th-century Protestant Reformation. As the Catholic Church resisted the reformers, several different theological movements splintered from the Church and bore different denominations. Presbyterianism was especially influenced by the French theologian John Calvin, who is credited with the development of Reformed theology, and the work of John Knox, a Scotsman and Roman Catholic Priest, who studied with Calvin in Geneva, Switzerland. John Knox brought back Reformed teachings to Scotland. In August 1560 the Parliament of Scotland adopted the Scots Confession as the creed of the Scottish Kingdom. In December 1560, the First Book of Discipline was published, outlining important doctrinal issues but also establishing regulations for church government, including the creation of ten ecclesiastical districts with appointed superintendents which later became known as presbyteries (elders).

In time, the Scots Confession would be supplanted by the Westminster Confession of Faith, and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms, which were formulated by the Westminster Assembly between 1643 and 1649.

Presbyterianism first officially arrived in Colonial America in 1644 with the establishment of Christ's First Presbyterian Church in Hempstead, New York. The Church was organized by the Rev. Richard Denton.

Another notable church was established in 1703 the first Presbytery in Philadelphia. In time, the presbytery would be joined by two more to form a synod (1717) and would eventually evolve into the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America in 1789. The nation's largest Presbyterian denomination, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) – PC (USA) – can trace their heritage back to the original PCUSA, as can the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC), the Bible Presbyterian Church (BPC), the Cumberland Presbyterian Church (CPC), the Cumberland Presbyterian Church in America, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC), and the Evangelical Covenant Order of Presbyterians (ECO).

Three main Presbyterian Bodies:

PC (USA) – 2 Million members and over 10,000 Congregations

PCA – 350,000 Members and over 1,700 Congregations

EPC – 140,000 Members in 364 Congregations

Resources:

history.pcusa.org; pcusa.org; pcanet.org; epc.org; thegospelcoalition.org

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COVENANT GRACE

The Westminster Confession of Faith:

Concerning those who are saved in Christ, the doctrine of God's eternal decree is held in harmony with the doctrine of [God's] love for all [humankind], [God's] gift of [God's] Son to be the propitiation for the sins of the whole world, and [God's] readiness to bestow [God's] saving grace on all who seek it; that concerning those who perish, the doctrine of God's eternal decree is held in harmony with the doctrine that God desires not the death of any sinner, but has provided in Christ a salvation sufficient for all, adapted to all, and freely offered in the gospel to all; that men [and women] are fully responsible for their treatment of God's gracious offer; that [God's] decree hinders no [one] from accepting that offer; and that no [one] is condemned except on the ground of his [or her] sin.

But then, they add: With this understanding of grace, we are all predestined to be saved if we repent of our sins and accept by faith the relationship of love that God offers to us.

A covenant is a binding agreement between two parties. In the covenant God established with the people of Israel, we see God calling, rescuing, and pursuing the Israelites in order to establish a covenant relationship with them.

According to the Larger Catechism: How is the covenant of grace administered under the New Testament?

Under the New Testament, Christ is revealed as the substance of the same covenant of grace, which was and still is to be administered in the preaching of the word and in the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's supper.

JUSTIFYING GRACE

The God who pursues us is also the God who saves us. Covenant grace is the work of God calling us into a relationship prior to the moment of salvation. Justifying grace is the work of God at the moment of salvation.

We experience justifying grace when we are restored to a right relationship with God. This does not happen by our own effort, but through God's favor revealed in Jesus Christ, in the death of Christ on the cross.

We are justified, or brought into a right relationship with God, through the grace of a loving God. Because of God's love for us, Jesus Christ took sin upon himself—became the full and final sacrifice for the sins of the world. We are saved by God's justifying grace. Stop trying to earn God's favor by your own efforts, God loves you. Just rest in the grace of the Lord.

In faith and trust we respond to the relationship of love that God offers to us. But even that faith is not ours, it is the gift of God, Paul said, so that no one can boast of having earned God's favor. God does it all. God offers a covenant relationship of love in Jesus Christ, which we receive by God's gift of faith.

Presbyterians believe it is through the action of God working in us that we become aware of our sinfulness and our need for God's mercy and forgiveness. Just as a parent is quick to welcome a wayward child who has repented of rebellion, God is willing to forgive our sins if we but confess them and ask for forgiveness in the name of Christ.

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According to the Larger Catechism: What is justifying faith?

Justifying faith is a saving grace that works in the hearts of sinners by the Spirit and the word of God. By it sinners are convinced of their sinfulness and miserable condition and realize that neither they nor anyone or anything else can get them out of that lost condition, and by it they give full assent to the truth of the gospel promise; they receive and rest on Christ and his righteousness for pardon from sin, as the gospel tells us, and for being accepted and accounted as righteous in the sight of God for salvation.

SANCTIFYING GRACE

Sanctifying grace is the work of the Spirit in our lives after we have committed our lives to God, enabling us to grow in holiness and to be strengthened for service.

We might think of God's grace in terms similar to marriage. Covenant grace is the period of courtship prior to the commitment to marriage. Justifying grace is the marriage ceremony — the moment when the commitment is made and the relationship is sealed. Sanctifying grace is life after the marriage — the way we live out the covenant relationship.

To sanctify means to make holy and to set apart for holy use. After our salvation, we continue to experience God's grace in our lives through the work of the Holy Spirit.

GOD'S PLAN OF SALVATION – PCA

They have a page dedicated to the “Good News”

“To “believe in” Jesus includes both a wholehearted trust in Him for forgiveness of sins and a decision to forsake one's sin or to “repent”: All who truly “repent [or turn from their sins] and believe [in Jesus for the forgiveness of their sins]” will be redeemed (Mark 1:15) and restored to a right relationship with God. To “believe in” Jesus also requires relating to, and putting trust in, Jesus as He truly is—not just a man in ancient history but also a living Savior today who knows our hearts and hears our prayers.”

What are we to do to be saved? We must turn to God in Christ, which entails turning back from sin. If we repent of (decide to forsake and turn from) our sin (as best we understand it) and trust in Christ as a living person, we will be saved from God's righteous wrath against our sins. This response of repentance and faith (or trust) can be explained in more detail as follows:

Turn to God. In the OT, God commands people to turn or return to Him, and so be saved (Isa. 6:10; Jer. 18:8). In the NT, Christ preached that people should turn to God, and Paul summarized his account of his preaching with that phrase: “that they [everyone] should repent and turn to God, performing deeds in keeping with their repentance” (Acts 26:18-20). As God's people—those who are being saved—we are to play the part of the Prodigal Son who, though conscious of sin, guilt, and folly, flees to the Father (Luke 15:20).

Turn away from sin. Turning to God necessarily implies our turning away from sin. The whole Bible—OT and NT—clearly teaches that to repent is to “acknowledge [God's] name and turn from [our] sins” (1 Kings 8:35; cf. 2 Chron. 7:14; Jer. 36:3; Ezek. 14:6; 18:30; Acts 3:19; 8:22; 26:18; Rev. 2:21-22; 9:20-21; 16:11). We cannot start to pursue God and sin at the same time. First John makes it clear that our basic way of life will either be oriented toward God and his light or toward the darkness of sin.

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From the Larger Catechism. What is repentance unto life?

Repentance unto life is a saving grace worked in the hearts of sinners by the Spirit and the word of God. By it sinners recognize not only how dangerous it is to commit sins but also how filthy and hateful they are to God. Understanding that in Christ God is merciful to those who repent, sinners suffer such deep sorrow for and hate their sins so much that they turn away from all of them and turn to God, attempting to walk continually with him according to this new obedience in every way.

Believe and trust. Put another way, our response is to believe and trust God's promises in Christ, and to commit ourselves to Christ, the living Lord, as his disciples. Among Jesus' first words in Mark's Gospel are "repent and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15). The obedience that typifies God's people, beginning with repentance, is to result from the faith and trust we have in Him and His Word (e.g., Josh. 22:16; Acts 27:25). Thus sins are sometimes called "breaking faith with God" (e.g., Ezra 10:2, 10). Having faith in Christ, which seals our union with Him through the Holy Spirit, is the means by which God accounts Christ's righteousness as our own (Rom. 3:21-26; 5:17-21; Gal. 2:16; Eph. 2:8-9; Phil. 3:9). Paul could refer to "salvation through faith in Christ" (2 Tim. 3:15). Frequently this initial repentance and faith can be simply expressed to God Himself in prayer.

Paul writes, "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Eph. 2:8-9). At the same time, Paul explained that Christians know an internal battle: "For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do" (Gal. 5:17). God's gift of salvation has been given to Christians, but the evidence of that salvation is lived out in the continual work of God's Spirit. We can deceive ourselves, and so Paul encourages his readers to "Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves" (2 Cor. 13:5). Peter encourages Christians to grow in godliness and so become more confident of their election (2 Peter 1). We don't create our own salvation by our actions, but we reflect and express it and so grow in our certainty of it. Because we Christians are liable to deceive ourselves, we should give ourselves to the study of God's Word to be instructed and encouraged in our salvation, and to learn what is inconsistent with it. Jesus' descriptions of His followers (see Matthew 5-7), or Paul's list of the fruit of the Spirit's work in us (see Gal. 5:22-23), act as spiritual maps that help us locate ourselves to see if we are on the path of salvation.

ON SACRAMENTS

How do the sacraments become effective means of salvation?

The sacraments become effective means of salvation, not by any power in them or by any inherent potency coming from the devoutness or the intention of whoever administers them, but rather by the working of the Holy Spirit and the blessing of Christ, who established them.

What is a sacrament?

A sacrament is a holy regulation established by Christ in his church as a sign, seal, and outward display to those within the covenant of grace of the benefits they have from Christ's mediation. It serves to strengthen and increase their faith and all other graces in them; it obliges them to obey God and to

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witness to and cherish their love and fellowship with each other; and it distinguishes them from those outside the covenant.

What are the parts of the sacrament?

There are two parts of the sacrament. One is the external, physical sign used according to Christ's own directions. The other is the internal, spiritual grace signified by the external use. Under the New Testament, Christ has established in the church only two sacraments, baptism and the Lord's supper.

What is baptism?

Baptism is a sacrament of the New Testament in which Christ has ordained washing with water in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit as a sign and seal of our being joined to Christ, of the remission of our sins through his blood, of rebirth by his Spirit, of adoption, and resurrection unto everlasting life; and it is the means of solemnly admitting those baptized into the visible church and of their making a public commitment that they belong completely and only to the Lord.

ON ASSURANCE

From the Larger Catechism - Can true believers be infallibly assured that they are and will remain in a state of grace, persevering to salvation?

Those who truly believe in Christ and try to walk in good conscience before him may be infallibly assured that they are and will remain in a state of grace, persevering to salvation. This assurance is not the result of any unusual revelation but comes from faith grounded on the truth of God's promises and from the Spirit, who gives believers the spiritual insight into their own hearts, to which these promises are directed. The Spirit also testifies with their spirits that they are the children of God.

Are all true believers assured all the time that they are saved and are in a state of grace?

Since the assurance of grace and salvation is not essential to faith, true believers may have to wait a long time for it, and once they have it, their assurance may be weakened and interrupted from being afflicted by all kinds of psychological problems, from sinning, from being tempted, and from losing the sense of God's favor. However, the Spirit of God keeps believers from complete despair by never allowing them to be without some inner sense of his presence and support.

From the Gospel Coalition – Apostasy

Definition: apostasy as “continued persistent rebellion and disobedience to God and his word,” or “total and final and public renunciation of all the chief principles and doctrines of Christianity.”

(There is a) need to be shown from Scripture the temporal, spiritual, and eternal judgments that fall on apostates. God uses His descriptions of how he abominates and judges apostasy as a means of grace to keep people from apostasy.

Christians need to be reminded of the incalculable need and value of the Church, the Word, the sacraments, and fellowship.

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Christians (need) to know that apostasy could be avoided by heart-cure and heart-care. Keep the Gospel at the very center of our hearts; love its truth and experience its power there. Keep sin out of our hearts, especially the highly-dangerous sins of spiritual pride and a censorious, judgmental spirit.

Because Presbyterians do not believe that a true believer can lose their salvation being an apostate is a condition of a person that is on the fence of being a believer, says he is but never having a Christian experience.

“When someone has no experience of personal need, no sense of God’s righteousness, no spiritual sight of Christ’s glory, no submission to the sovereignty of God, and no trembling at God’s Word, then doctrinal apostasy is just around the corner.”

CONCLUSION

Catholicism, Anglicanism, Methodism, and Lutheranism all require repentance and faith to go to heaven. Baptism is overtly required by Catholicism, Anglicanism, and Methodism. While Lutheranism does not overtly require baptism, it states that the Holy Spirit will lead a true believer to water baptism.

What is different from Presbyterianism? Nothing. Repentance is highly stressed (which is to turn from sin and turn to God), grace is obtained through sacraments, assurance of being saved is demonstrated by maintaining the sacraments, good works, and avoidance of sin. They do not believe once a person is saved, they can lose it, but one cannot know for certain that they are part of the elect until a life of perseverance is demonstrated.

We are seeing once again that the first problem is the definition. Repentance is misdefined and misapplied. Their definition of faith is not doctrine that is believed, it is experiential, emotional, and commitment-based. Grace is not unmerited favor; it is merited through the sacraments.

THE DIFFERENCE

When works are included in the Gospel it nullifies grace, and grace is the means to our salvation. Works are separate from faith. Faith is in accordance with grace.

If a believer is qualified for salvation by remaining in grace through the sacraments (baptized, communion), and/or repenting of their sins (sorry, lessen sins, change desire), it is not by grace through faith. Their Gospel is not consistent with the Bible, and it is a false Gospel.

Repent word study available