

Distinctives



Of

Biblical

Presbyterianism

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DISTINCTIVES OF BIBLICAL PRESBYTERIANISM

By John Otis

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this work is to set forth the major distinctives of Biblical Presbyterianism in order that those who are members of a Presbyterian Church might know in a somewhat concise way what their church believes and that curious persons might know what Presbyterians generally believe. A majority of those who are members of a Presbyterian Church probably do not know what the fundamental tenets of their church are, nor do they know why they are Presbyterians. By this we mean that most could not give sufficient biblical or theological reasons why they are Presbyterian as opposed to Baptist, Methodist, Church of God, etc. There is a great need for members not only to know clearly what they believe but also why they believe it. Thomas Witherow perceived the situation quite clearly in his work entitled, *The Apostolic Church*. In speaking about why people join churches, Witherow has said:

They are guided by feeling rather than by judgment. They do not first ascertain the leading principles of the denomination from its acknowledged standards, and then examine these principles in the light of the Word of God. The bulk of mankind are not intellectual enough to search for principles and weigh them. At least they do not take the trouble, but are influenced in their choice, either by the authority of some great men, or the moral worth of some particular persons, or the piety and eloquence of some local minister.¹

The term "Biblical Presbyterianism" is used for a specific reason. As unfortunate as it may be, one is forced to use such terminology in light of the current "theological atmosphere" in most mainline denominations. There are those churches, which deny much of what will be set forth in this presentation, and yet they refer to themselves as Presbyterians. They are Presbyterians in name only. Upon close scrutiny of their theological beliefs these churches hardly could be called "Christian." Some of these deny the deity of Jesus Christ, His virgin birth, His personal, visible return, the inerrancy of Scripture, etc. And the sad thing is that so many do not realize that there is

such a polarization of theological beliefs in "Presbyterianism." Those of us that do affirm all the beliefs that will be set forth in this work are often disturbed that we are automatically lumped together with others under the term "Presbyterian." We would wish that these churches would remove the name "Presbyterian" since they deny what is true Biblical Presbyterianism. By "Biblical Presbyterianism" we mean that system of belief, which conforms itself, to Scripture in all details. And any subsequent use of the term "Presbyterian" in this presentation will assume that this is what we mean by this term.

THE INERRANCY OF SCRIPTURE

Presbyterians believe that God has revealed Himself in two areas: 1) general revelation, 2) special revelation. By "general revelation" we mean that God has given information about Himself in His entire creation through the power and focus of nature, in the constitution of the human mind, in the voice of conscience, and in the facts of experience and history (Ps. 19:1,2; Rom. 1:19,20; 2:14,15).² The main purpose that general revelation serves is to render mankind inexcusable. God does exist and all men are accountable to Him. However, general revelation is insufficient in its ability to convey a reliable knowledge of God. This is because it has been tainted

with sin (Rom. 8:19-22). It cannot provide man knowledge of the way of salvation. Thus, "special revelation" is needed.

This special revelation is now embedded in the Bible. Because of sin's entrance into the world, nature was corrupted becoming obscured to man. Man became spiritually blind unable to understand accurately the physical universe or himself. It was necessary that God should reinterpret the facts of the universe and provide man with a means to remedy his sinful condition enabling him to have fellowship with his creator and understand the facts of the universe.

The Holy Scriptures are central in the thinking and behavior of Presbyterians. The Bible is seen as the inspired Word of God and the infallible rule for faith and practice (II Timothy 3:16,17; I Thess. 2:13). How did God inspire the Scriptures? The Holy Spirit acted on the writers in such a way to preserve their character, temperament, gifts and talents, education and culture, vocabulary, and style so that what they wrote was exactly what God wanted to convey (II Peter 1:20,21).

By the inerrancy of Scripture, Presbyterians imply that the Bible is without error in all of its teaching. This means that the Bible is inspired in its historical archaeological and scientific facts as well as it is in its

so-called moral or religious teaching. Not only does this inspiration extend to the entirety of the Bible but also it extends to the very words employed. This is referred to as "verbal inspiration." Every single word of Scripture is God-breathed. Paul mentioned that his words were Spirit taught words (I Cor. 2:13). And both he and Jesus formulated arguments on the basis of a single word (Matt. 22:43, 45; John 10:35; Gal. 3:16). And Jesus applied it to the very jot and tittle of the Scriptures (Matt. 5:18).

Presbyterians would hold that the Scripture is the only sure guide for our salvation and growth in holiness (II Tim. 3:15). And the Holy Spirit never leads anyone apart from the revealed Word of God (John 16:13; 17:17). All thoughts and all actions must be viewed through the "spectacles" of Scripture. It is the sure foundation that never changes. The inerrancy of Scripture was listed here as the first major distinctive of Presbyterianism simply because one's view of Scripture determines one's approach to theology.

A CREEDAL AND CONFSSIONAL DENOMINATION

Presbyterianism is without doubt a creedal and confessional church. What do we mean by this? First, we should note the slight differences between creeds

and confessions. It could be said that creeds such as the three classic creeds: Apostles', Nicene and Athanasian - seek to enumerate the unifying essentials of the church universal for all ages. A creed deals with the fundamentals of the church. A confession, on the other hand, is a more detailed treatment of theology. One only has to look at the difference between the Apostles' Creed and the Westminster Confession of Faith to note this point.

Presbyterians would affirm that the statements set forth in the ancient creeds and the Westminster Confession of Faith are accurate statements of Scriptural truths (as far as fallible men can discern). We would say, for example, that the Westminster Confession of Faith contains the system of doctrine as taught in the Bible.

In saying this, we do not place the Confessional standards on par with the Bible. Creeds and Confessions are not independent assertions of truth serving as supplemental material to the Scriptures. They are wholly subordinate to the Bible. The Westminster Confession emphatically asserts the sole sufficiency of Scripture:

The authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed, and obeyed, dependeth not upon the testimony of any

man, or church, but wholly upon God (who is truth itself) the author thereof: and therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God (WCF 1:4). The supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture (WCF 1:10).

Furthermore, the Confession makes mention of the action of church bodies and their relative authority. Such actions are to be heeded only, "if consonant to the Word of God" (WCF 31:3).

Then why have creeds and confessions? What purpose do they serve? There are large segments of professing Christianity that consider themselves anti-creedal and anti-confessional. They assert that such documents detract from the sole sufficiency of Scripture. Their great motto is: "no creed by the Bible." What are we to make of such statements? First, as already noted, creedal and confessional churches do not deny the sole sufficiency of Scripture but diligently cherish this truth. Second, the statement that "we have no creed but the Bible" is itself a creed!

It is saying in effect, "my creed is that I have no creed by the Bible." Practically speaking, this doesn't say much of anything. It is a vague statement. Such churches miss the whole point. The overriding purpose of creeds and confessions is to clearly set forth what one believes about the Bible. Presbyterians have merely said, "if a person wants to know what we believe, simply look at the creeds and confessions that we recognize as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Bible." Anti-creedal and anti-confessional churches simply have not recognized or written down the distinctives of their belief in one given document. But most assuredly, these churches do have doctrinal beliefs that they believe Scripture supports.

Presbyterianism is indeed a creedal and confessional church. We hold forth our statements of faith before the watching world. We invite all to study them and understand what we believe and why we believe it. For a fine presentation on the nature and function of creeds see Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr.'s tract entitled *The Usefulness of Creeds*.

A COVENANTAL VIEW OF SCRIPTURE

Presbyterians would affirm a covenantal view of the Bible as opposed to a dispensational view. By a

dispensational view we mean that view which states that God deals with man in a different way during each of the dispensations of human history. When man fails each test given in each dispensation, God institutes a new one. The dominant element of dispensationalism is that each era is basically distinct from all the others except for a minor continuity among them. This system denies an overriding continuity throughout the different stages of history. The discontinuity is greater than what continuity exists among them.

What is meant by the term, "covenant"? O. Palmer Robertson in his book, *The Christ of the Covenants*, defines a covenant as "a bond in blood sovereignly administered."³ There are several key elements in this definition. First, a covenant is that which bonds persons together. The use of oaths and signs demonstrates that a covenant is a bond. A covenant commits the individual parties to one another.

A covenant is a bond-in-blood. This expresses a life and death commitment. The rituals associated with a covenant in Scripture, such as in Gen. 15, reflect a "cutting process" whereby blood is shed. In Gen. 15 the animal-division signifies a "pledge to the death." The dismembered animal represents the curse the parties are liable to if they violate the covenant. The

phrase "bond in blood" expresses vividly the idea of Heb. 9:22, "apart from the shedding of blood there is no remission." Blood in the Bible represents life. Life is said to be in the Blood (Lev. 17:11). A pouring out of blood then signifies the only way the covenant commitment can be terminated. Robertson summarizes it well, "a covenant is a bond-in-blood. It involves commitments with life and death consequences. At the point of covenantal inauguration, a formalizing process of blood shedding commits the parties of the covenant to one another. This blood shedding represents the intensity of the commitment of the covenant. By the covenant they are bound for life and death."⁴

The other key element of a covenant is the fact that it is sovereignly administered. This means there is no bargaining going on, and it means that one is in the position of dictating all the terms.

Presbyterians see that God has entered into such a bond-in-blood commitment with mankind. Being the sovereign Lord of heaven and earth, God has dictated the terms of the covenant. He promises blessing to man if he is obedient to the covenant stipulations, and He threatens man with death if he disobeys. Hence, man is placed in a position of being either a covenant keeper or covenant breaker. The concept of covenant

unfolds in Scripture in a unique way. God is seen as entering into a covenant with man in different historical periods. From the beginning of creation to the end of the world, God is in covenant with man. There is a unity and diversity to the covenants. God's covenant with man can be divided into two categories: 1) a covenant of works, 2) a covenant of grace or redemption.

What is meant by the covenant of works? This is used to refer to the testing period of Adam before his fall into sin. If Adam obeys he will receive the blessings of God. Though the term "covenant" is not used, the essential elements of a covenant are present. God's relationship to man is indeed a bond-in-blood sovereignly administered. Man was to obey God's specific command, which was the precise point of testing - to not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 2:16,17). It was man's failure at this juncture that caused him to suffer the penalty for violating the covenant. Man died spiritually and he would die physically one day. But, it was at this point that God's grace shone brightly. God then entered into a covenant of grace or redemption with man.

What is the covenant of grace? Louis Berkhof's definition is sufficient: "That gracious agreement between the offended God and the offending but elect

sinner, in which God promises salvation through faith in Christ, and the sinner accepts this in faith, promising a life of faith and obedience."⁵

Jesus Christ is the point of division in Biblical history. God's covenant with man **before** Christ is called the "old covenant or Old Testament" and the covenant **after** Christ is the "new covenant or New Testament." The old covenant is characterized by "promise," "shadow," and "prophecy" whereas the new covenant is characterized as "fulfillment," "reality," and "realization."⁶

In speaking about the covenant of grace these individual covenants are expressed in Scripture: 1) the Adamic, 2) the Noahic, 3) the Abrahamic, 4) the Mosaic, 5) the Davidic, and 6) the new or consummatory.

The beauty of these covenants is that they are unified. They build upon each succeeding one adding newer dimensions yet preserving the essential elements of the previous ones. There is a definite line of progression. Robertson speaks of a **structural and thematic** unity of the covenants.⁷

Structural Unity

There is a **unity in historical experience**. It was because of the promise of the Abrahamic covenant that God was moved to deliver Israel from Egyptian bondage and bring them to the Promised Land (Ex. 2:24; 3:16,17; 6:4-8; Ps. 105:8-12,42,45; 106:45). Moses' altar which was built (Ex. 24:4) links the tribal structure of the patriarchal period to the beginning of the Mosaic covenant. And the covenant with David is tied with Israel's deliverance from Egypt (II Sam. 7:6,23). Israel's national judgment can be understood with reference to the Mosaic covenant. It was Israel's violation of the Mosaic covenant during the time of the Davidic covenant that brought their captivity.

There is a **unity in genealogical administration**. Unto a "thousand generations" He has remembered His covenant (Deut. 7:9; Ps. 105:8-10). It is manifested with reference to the "seed" concept (Gen. 15:18; Ex. 20:5,6; Deut. 7:9; II Sam. 7:12). This principle is seen in the New Testament in the "engrafting of the Gentiles" (Rom. 11:17,19; Gal. 3:29).

The unity of the covenants is related to the "new covenant." The new covenant represents a consummate fulfillment of the earlier covenants. The

new expressed in Jer. 31:31ff is linked to the Mosaic covenants. It will not have certain external features. The law of God is in the believer's heart. The new covenant is linked, also, to the Abrahamic covenant. God will "give them one heart and one way" that they may fear Him (Jer. 32:39,40). And He will "faithfully plant them in this land" (Jer. 32:41). Ezekiel relates the new covenant with the Davidic (Ezek. 34:23,24). The new covenant is linked with the Noahic. The Noahic covenant preserved a people for Him. And even today the regularity of the seasons is continuation of this covenant (Gen. 8:22). Moreover, the new covenant is linked to the Adamic covenant. In Gen. 3:15 God promised a redeemer as a consequence of man's fall. In the New Testament God's commitment to the word that was first spoken to the serpent is inviolable (Rom. 16:20).

Thematic Unity

The covenants are united by a great theme as well as by a structural unity. The great theme, which recurs, is: "I shall be your God and you shall be my people." The heart of the covenant of grace is seen as "God is with us."

The first occurrence of this theme is seen in Gen. 17:7 in connection with circumcision as the sign and seal

of the Abrahamic covenant. The thematic phrase is seen under the Mosaic covenant with reference to Israel's deliverance from slavery (Ex. 6:6,7; 19:4,5; Lev. 11:45; Deut. 4:20). The theme is seen in the Davidic covenant (II Kings 11:17). In Ezek. 34:24 the prophet brings out the fact that God will be their God and David my prince in their midst. And the new covenant uses the phrase with reference to God's people (II Cor. 6:16; Heb. 8:10).

Moreover, this theme, "I shall be your God and you shall be My people," is associated with God's dwelling in the midst of His people. This is seen in the progression from the tabernacle to the temple, to the incarnate tabernacle and to the church. We see God dwelling with His people in the tabernacle (Ex. 25:8; 29:42-44; Lev. 26:9-13). We then see God's presence in the sanctuary of the temple (II Chron. 5:14; Ezek. 43:4-7). Jesus Christ is seen as the incarnate Son tabernacling in our midst (John 1:14). And the church is called the temple of God where He dwells with us (Eph. 2:21ff). The covenant theme culminates in one person - Jesus Christ, Isaiah develops this theme (Isa. 42:6; 49:8; 55:3,4). Jesus is the very embodiment of the covenant. Jesus becomes the unifying principle in all of Scripture. Jesus, in His substitutionary death, paid the penalty for our being

covenant breakers (I Peter 3:18; Col. 2:13,14). Since the covenants find their final converging point in Jesus Christ they are all unified. Since Christ cannot be divided neither can the covenants be fragmented.

A covenantal view of Scripture is a major distinctive of Presbyterianism. Without understanding the concept of the covenant one simply cannot appreciate the diversity and unity of Scripture. Covenant theology is a major pillar undergirding Presbyterianism.

AN AFFIRMATION OF HISTORIC CHRISTIAN DOCTRINES

The Trinity

Presbyterianism believes in the doctrine of the Trinity. By the Trinity we mean that while God is essentially **ONE**, He exists in **THREE** distinct persons - the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. There is then, a unity and diversity in the Godhead. God is one God (Deut. 6:4). He is not three beings or individual gods with the same nature; He is one being with **one essence**. Yet, God is **three** as He is truly one. In saying this, God is one in three and three in one. Hence it can never be said that God exists before His Trinity. God has **eternally** existed as a triune God.

To understand the unity and diversity of God is a great mystery for finite man. We simply cannot grasp the eternal (Isa. 55:8,9). Any illustration, such as the three states of water, to explain the Trinity falls terribly short. There is no human illustration to explain God!

What Scriptural evidence do we have for the Trinity? In the Old Testament god speaks of Himself in the plural (Gen. 1:26; 11:7). In the New Testament the Three persons are mentioned together (Matt. 28:19; II Cor. 13:14; Luke 3:21,22; I Cor. 12:4-6; I Peter 1:2).

How are the three persons of the Godhead revealed in Scripture? Even though the persons are not subordinate to the other in their essential being it can be said that the Father is first, the Son second, and the Spirit, third. The distinctions of these persons are not differences of essence or being, but they are distinctions within the being of God. The particular property of each is solely theirs, and it is never communicated to the other. Hence, it is wrong to say that the Father is the Son or the Spirit is the Father or the Spirit is the Son, etc.

With regards to the plan or redemption as seen in the covenant of grace, the three persons of the Godhead are singled out as having particular functions. For example, the Father is frequently used to designate the creator of all things (I Cor. 8:6; Heb. 12:9; James 1:17). The name, Father, is usually used with His relationship to the Son as the second person of the Trinity (John 1:14:18; 8:54; 14:12,13). The New Testament designates the triune God as the Father of all of His spiritual children (Matt. 5:45, 6:6-15; Rom. 8:16; I John 3:1). Generally speaking, the works of the Triune God are attributed to the works of the Father. The Father is said to be the designer and controlling force in the work of redemption (John

6:37,38; 17:4-7; Ps. 2:7-9; 40:6-9; Isa. 53:10; Eph. 1:3-6).

The name "Son" or "second person of the Trinity" is used because of His eternal relationship with the Father (John 1:1-3; 14,18). He bears the name, Son, in order to designate His as the Messiah (Matt. 8:29; 27:40; 26:63, John 1:49; 11:27). The works of the Son are those of mediation. He mediated the work of creation (John 1:3,10; Heb. 1:2,3; Col. 1:15-17), and He mediated the work of redemption (Heb. 9:15).

The Holy Spirit is the third person of the Trinity. He is not merely an impersonal force, as some teach. He is a person (John 14:16,17,26; 15:26; 16:7-15; Rom. 8:26). He has all the characteristics of a person, such as intelligence (John 14:26), affections (Eph. 4:30), will (I Cor. 2:11), etc. His special characteristic is that He proceeds from the Father and the Son (John 15:26; 16:7-10; Rom. 8:9; Gal. 4:6). By the term "proceed" the Scripture means that the Holy Spirit is never seen as operating independently of the Father or the Son. He is called the "Spirit of God" and the "Spirit of Christ." But again, in saying this, it does not diminish the truth that the Holy Spirit is a **distinct** person of the Godhead. His task is to bring to fruition all things in both creation and redemption (Gen. 1:3; Job 26:13; Luke 1:35; John 3:34; I Cor. 12:4-11; Eph. 2:22). He

is commonly said to apply the work of redemption accomplished by the Son.

The deity of the Spirit is seen by the names assigned to Him (Acts 5:3,4; I Cor. 3:16; II Tim. 3:16), by the perfections ascribed to Him (Ps. 139:7-10; Isa. 40:13,15; I Cor. 2:10,11; 12:11; Rom. 15:19; Heb. 9:140, by divine works performed by Him (Gen. 1:2; Job 26:13; 33:4; Ps. 104:30; John 3:5; Titus 3:5; Rom. 8:11), and by divine honor given Him (Matt. 28:19, Rom. 9:1; II Cor. 13:14).

The Creation

Presbyterians believe that the universe was created by the Triune God (Gen. 1:2; Job 26: 13; 33:4; Ps. 33:6; 104:30; Isa. 40:12,13; John 1:3; Col. 1:15-17) and out of nothing (Gen. 1:1; Ps. 33:9; 148:5; Rom. 4:7; Heb. 11:3). God gave the universe a **separate** existence distinct from His being so that the universe in no way can be construed to be any part of God. The universe constantly is dependent upon Him **being sustained** daily by His power. Moreover, He is never withdrawn from the universe, but He is ever present in His creation (Ps. 139:7-10; Jer. 23:24).

Presbyterians affirm the literalness of a six-day creation. The theory of evolution is seen as wholly lacking in scientific evidence and definitely contrary

to Scripture. The concept of "Theistic evolution" is absolutely unacceptable. It amounts to nothing more than a compromise with atheistic scientific beliefs. Theistic evolution says God used the process of evolution to create the universe. The "days" in creation are the millions of years needed for the process. Such a position is untenable in Scripture.

It is widely believed among Presbyterians that the six-day creation is to be understood in a literal way (successive 24-hour periods). Support for this interpretation is: 1) the Hebrew word "Yom" (day) normally denotes an ordinary 24 hour period and should be interpreted as such unless the context demands otherwise, 2) the repeated mention of morning and evening favor the 24 hour day, 3) it was an ordinary day God set aside and hallowed as a day of rest, 4) in Ex. 20:9-11 Israel is called to labor six days and rest on the seventh because God made heaven and earth in six days and rested the seventh, 5) the last three days were ordinary days for they were determined by the earth's rotation to the sun. If the last three days were ordinary days, why not the rest?

The Person of Christ

Presbyterians affirm the historic Christian doctrine that Jesus Christ is truly God in the flesh. We believe

that Scripture teaches that Christ possessed **two distinct natures** yet united in **one person** forever.

The Deity of Christ

The divine nature of Jesus Christ is clearly taught in Scripture. In the Old Testament in the prophecy concerning the coming Messiah He is said to be divine (Isa. 9:61; Jer. 23:6; Dan. 7:13; Micah 5:2; Zech. 13:7; Mal. 3:1). The Gospel account of John provides ample proof of Jesus' deity (John 1:1-3,14,18,25-27; 11:41,44; 20:28). The other gospels testify to this fact also (Matt. 5:17; 9:6; 11:1-6,27; 14:33; 16:16; 25:31ff; 28:18; Mark 8:38). And in the Pauline epistles and in Hebrews we see the following (Rom. 1:7; 9:5; I Cor. 3; 2:8; II Cor. 5:10; Gal. 2:20; 4:4; Pil. 2:6; Col. 2:9; I Tim. 3:16; Heb. 1:1-3,5,8; 4:14; 5:8).

The Humanity of Christ

Besides being fully divine, Jesus Christ is fully a human being. He possesses a true human nature. Jesus called Himself a man as did others (John 8:40; Acts 2:22; Rom. 5:15; I Cor. 15:21). We are told He was manifested in the flesh (I John 1:14; I Tim. 3:16; I John 4:2), He has the essential elements of a human nature - a material body and a rational soul (Matt.

26:26,28,38; Luke 23:46; 24:39; John 11:33; Heb. 2:14). He was also subject to human development and to its frailties (Matt. 4:6; 11:35; 12:27; 19:28,30; Heb. 2:10,18; 5:7,8).

Though Jesus possessed a true human nature He was **without sin** ((Luke 1:35; John 8:46; II Cor. 5:21; Heb. 4:15; 9:14; I Peter 2:22; I John 3:5). He not only did no sin but also could not sin. The reason is because of the bond between His human and divine natures. His divine nature precluded Him from any possible sin.

It was necessary that Christ be both God and man in one person. Only as a **real man** could He be our substitute, suffering and dying for our sin (Heb. 2:17). Only sinless man could atone for our sins (Heb. 7:26). And only as God could He give a sacrifice of infinite worth and bear God's wrath in order to deliver others from it (Ps. 49:7-10; 130:3).

Two Natures in One Person

There is but one person as the mediator and that person is the unchangeable Son of God. In the incarnation of Christ, the second Person of the Trinity did not change into a human, nor did He adopt a human person. He merely **assumed** a human nature in **addition** to His deity (Phil 2:6-8). Jesus Christ

could be properly referred to as the God-man, possessing all the essential qualities of both human and divine nature.

Scripture testifies to the unity of the Person of Christ. When Christ speaks it is always the same person who speaks not a divine or human voice separate from one another (John 10:30; 17:5 as compared with Matt. 27:46 and John 19:28). Human characteristics are at times ascribed to the person with a divine title (Acts 20:28; I Cor. 2:8; Col. 1:13,14), and divine characteristics are at times ascribed to the person with a human title (John 3:13; 6:62; Rom. 9:5).

The Work of Christ

His Offices

Presbyterians assert that Jesus performed the work of three biblical offices - that of prophet, priest, and king. How does He perform His office as prophet? He reveals to us by His word and Spirit what God's will is for our salvation. The spirit of Christ spoke through the prophets of old (I Peter 1:11; 3:18-20). Christ, Himself, was the prophet promised by God (Deut. 18:15-18). Jesus claims to bring a message from the Father (John 8:26-28; 12:49,50; 14:10,24). He foretells future events (Matt. 24:3-35; Luke 19:41-44). He speaks with great authority so that people

recognize Him as a prophet (Matt. 21:11,46; Luke 7:16; 24:19; John 6:14).

How does Jesus perform His office as priest? Jesus offered Himself as a sacrifice to meet the demands of divine justice. In so doing He reconciled us to God, and He continually intercedes on our behalf. The Old Testament predicted and prefigured the coming Messiah as a priest (Ps. 110:4; Zech. 6:13; Isa. 53). In the book of Hebrews, He is repeatedly referred to as a priest (3:1; 4:14; 5:5; 6:29; 7:26; 8:1). Other books refer to His priestly work as well (Mark 10:45; John 1:29; Rom. 3:24,25; I Cor. 5:7; I John 2:2; I Peter 2:24; 3:18).

The Old Testament sacrifices all pointed to the one great sacrifice that Christ would make (Heb. 9:23,24; 10:1; 13:11,12). He is called the "Lamb of God" (John 1:29) and "our Passover" (I Cor. 5:7). Not only did He become a sacrifice for our sins, but also He continually intercedes or pleads our cause before God's throne (Rom. 8:34; Heb. 7:25; 9:24; I John 2).

And finally, how does Jesus perform His office as King? As our king Christ subdues all His and our enemies. Christ's office as king is a spiritual one whereby it is established in our hearts and lives. It is increased primarily through the working of the

church. His kingship is a **present reality** (Matt. 12:28; Luke 17:21; Col. 1:13).

The Atonement of Christ

Several key things ought to be noted in this regard. A general meaning of atonement is, "a satisfaction made for our offense." An atonement for sin is a necessity because God cannot tolerate sin in His presence (Hab. 1:13; Ex. 20:5; 23:7; Ps. 5:5,6; Nahum 1:2; Rom. 1:18, 32). Moreover, man, being a covenant breaker, must pay the penalty for this violation (Gen. 3:3; Rom. 6:23).

The atonement of Christ accomplished several things: 1) it was a vicarious atonement meaning that Christ paid the penalty, Himself, for our sin that we were liable for. He is our substitute (Isa. 53:6; John 1:29; Heb. 9:28; I Peter 3:18; Gal. 1:4), 2) it was a satisfaction for divine justice, 3) it consisted in Christ's keeping the law in every detail in behalf of sinners (Rom. 8:4; 10:4), and 4) it consisted in Him paying the penalty for sin and the dispensing of the debt against us (Isa. 53:8; Rom. 4:25; Gal. 3:13; I Peter 2:24; Col. 2:13,14).

The Resurrection and Second Advent of Christ

Presbyterians believe that Jesus literally rose from the grave on the third day as He predicted (John 2:19,20).

In His resurrection, human nature was restored to its original perfection and even raised to a higher status. He became the "first fruits of them that slept" (I Cor. 15:20) and the "firstborn of the dead" (Col. 1:18). His resurrection is significant because 1) it declared that the Father's demands for justice were met (Phil 2:9), 2) it symbolized the justification, regeneration, and final resurrection of believers (Rom. 6:4,5,9; I Cor. 6:14; 15:20-22), and 3) it was the cause for our justification, regeneration, and resurrection (Rom. 4:25, 5:10; Eph. 1:20; Phil. 3:10; I Peter 1:13).

After His resurrection Christ ascended into heaven to sit at the right hand of God the Father (Acts 1:6-11; 2:32-36; Eph. 1:20; 4:8-10; I Tim. 3:16). The significance of the ascension is that as our great high priest He enters the inner sanctuary, as it were, to present to the Father His sacrifice. He begins His work as intercessor. He ascends to prepare a place for us (John 14:1-3). Being at the Father's right hand (a symbol for a position of great power and glory) Christ governs and defends His church; He governs the universe; and He intercedes for His people.

Concerning His second advent, Presbyterians believe Jesus is personally and visibly going to return to earth again (Acts 1:11) for the purpose of judging the living and the dead and for the perfecting of the salvation of

His people (I Cor. 4:5; II Cor. 5:10; John 5:22, 27; Rom. 2:26; II Tim. 4:1; Phil. 3:20; Col. 3:4; I Thess. 4:13-17; II Thess. 1:7-10; 2:1-12; Titus 2:13,14; II Peter 3:10-13).

THE PROVIDENCE OF GOD

Presbyterians assert that the Triune God is in absolute control of His universe and that nothing happens outside of His permissive will. His providence can be seen in the following ways: 1) God governs and sustains the universe (Isa. 45:7; Col. 1:17; Heb. 1:3), 2) God directs and controls all historic events (Prov. 21:1; Ps. 115:3; 135:6; Isa. 55:11; Jer. 27:5; Dan. 2:21; 4:35; Rom. 8:28; 13:1,4; Eph. 1:11), 3) God has determined the purpose for all things (Prov. 16:4; Isa. 46:10; Rev. 4:11), 4) God is intricately involved in the details of life (Isa. 46:10, 11; Matt. 6:26; 10:29, 3; Job 1:21; 2:10), 5) God cannot be separated from man's moral choices (Prov. 16:1; Gen. 45:5,8; 5:20; Deut. 2:30; Ezra 7:6).

PREDESTINATION

If there is one doctrine that Presbyterians are noted for it would be this one. Most people do not understand what this doctrine really teaches. Simply defined, predestination is "the plan or purpose of God respecting His moral creatures."⁸ Predestination is

rooted in God's providential control over all things. He has not set the universe into motion and then withdrawn Himself waiting to see what happens. God has a predetermined plan (Isa. 46:10; Ps. 33:11; Prov. 19:21; Eph. 3:11). God has even predetermined the very details of all that comes to pass (Eph. 1:11; Acts 17:26; Job 14:5; Ps. 139:16; Rom. 8:28). This predetermined plan incorporates the righteous acts of men (Eph. 1:12; 2:10; Phil. 2:12,13; John 15:16). Finally, God's predetermined plan involves man's very salvation. This point will be elaborated upon later. And one of the greatest mysteries is that God's predetermined plan incorporates the evil acts of men yet preserving God from any implication in their sinful acts (Gen. 50:20; Acts 4:27,28; John 17:12; Luke 22:22).

AGREEMENT WITH THE FIVE POINTS OF CALVINISM

Presbyterians would affirm all of the five points of Calvinism as accurate statements of God's dealings with man with respect to his salvation. These five points are:

- 1) total depravity**
- 2) unconditional election**
- 3) limited atonement (definite personal atonement)**
- 4) irresistible calling**
- 5) perseverance of the saints**

As an historical note, these five points were set forth by the Synod of Dort in 1618 to counter the five points of Arminianism. This teaching of Arminianism was derived from the theology of James Arminius, a Dutch professor. After his death in 1610 his followers, known as Arminians, set forth his teaching in what came to be known as the five points of Arminianism. These five points were:

1) free will or human ability

Even though man was affected by sin in the fall, the sin did not damage him to the extent to render him completely incapable of exercising a genuine spiritual pursuit of God. Man was capable of cooperating with God in choosing that which is spiritually good.

2) conditional election

God's election is based on His foreknowledge of all who would desire to be saved due to their own free will. Hence, God's election depends upon man's absolute freedom of choice. This is commonly

pictured as God looking down the corridors of history and knowing all who desire to be saved and then electing them to salvation.

3) universal redemption or general atonement

This belief is that Jesus actually died for all men in the same manner. He made it possible for all to be saved. The effect of Jesus' death is made effectual only for those who by their free will choose to accept His atonement.

4) the Holy Spirit in regeneration is limited by human free will

This teaches **that** men can effectually resist the working of the Holy Spirit as the Spirit seeks to bring that person to a saving knowledge in Christ. It is possible that God's purposes can be frustrated by man's free will. The Holy Spirit cannot regenerate a man unless a man is first willing to allow this.

5) falling from salvation

Man can actually lose his salvation. This is the logical inference of the four other points. If man must first take the initiative in his salvation he must likewise be responsible for preserving it. Arminianism teaches that man in the determining factor in his own

salvation. If sinful man still has the ability to do good in god's sight and if God via the Holy Spirit cannot regenerate a man without the man allowing it, then the all sovereign God is rendered virtually powerless with respect to man's salvation. Therefore, it can be said that man is indeed the determining factor in his salvation. It was such teaching that prompted the Synod of Dort to enumerate its countering five points with Scriptural citations. Let's look in detail at these five points of Calvinism, as they popularly have been called.

1) Total depravity or total inability

This teaching states that though all men are not equally as bad in the same sense, nor that they are as evil as they could be; nevertheless, they are dead in sin and wholly unable to love God or do anything of their own free will to come to a saving knowledge of Christ. The fall of man (Gen. 3) means that sin has affected man's entire being - his affections, understanding, and will. Man is still a free moral agent in the sense he can make genuine moral choices, but the whole point is that fallen man does not want to seek God. In terms of his ability to turn to Christ and repent, this he cannot do (John 3:19; 5:40).

A man who is spiritually dead (Eph. 2:1-3) cannot of his own ability be made alive spiritually. Men are all

bound in sin and enslaved to Satan (II Tim. 2:25). Fallen man is blind to the light of the Gospel (II Cor. 4:4) and they cannot hear with understanding (Mark 4:11ff). Fallen man cannot possess in himself the necessary knowledge to be saved (I Cor. 2:14). Fallen man simply does not pursue righteousness (Rom. 3:10-18).

"Can the **dead** raise themselves? Can the **bound** free themselves? Can the **blind** give themselves sight, or the deaf hearing? Can the slaves redeem themselves? Can the **uninstructable** teach themselves? Can the **naturally sinful** change themselves? Surely not! Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean? asks Job: and he answers, 'not one!'" (Job 14:4). "'Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots? asks Jeremiah; 'if they can' he concludes 'then may ye also do good, that are accustomed to do evil'" (Jer. 13:23).⁹

Presbyterianism thus teaches that fallen man left to himself cannot under any circumstances bring about spiritual life from his own deaden soul. This is an act only God can accomplish (Eph. 2:5).

2) **Unconditional election**

This point follows naturally from the doctrine of total inability. If man is spiritually dead then the only

remedy lies outside of man - that is with God. "If man is unable to save himself on account of the Fall of Adam, being a **total** fall, and if god alone can save, and if **all** are not saved, then the conclusion must be that God has not chosen to save all."¹⁰

The Scripture does testify of God's unconditional election. Deut. 7: emphatically sets forth God's election of Israel. God chose Jacob over Esau (Rom. 9:13). Jesus chose those whom He desired to be His disciples (John 15:6). God spares whom He desires (Rom. 9:15). Believers are indeed chosen in Christ (Eph. 1:4,5; I Peter 2:9,10).

Rom. 8:29 speaks of election, and the word foreknowledge is used in connection with it. In Biblical usage "foreknowledge" means to "forelove." It is a love bestowed without merit seen in the recipient. God has chosen to love some before the foundation of the world. God's plan or election is not based upon any foreseen faith in man (Rom. 9:11-13; 10:20; II Tim. 1:9; Acts 13:48; I Thess. 1:4,5; II Thess. 2:13, 14; Phil. 1:29).

Presbyterianism sees God as an all merciful God who of His own choosing decided to save some out of their sin and misery. Each person who professes Christ ought to thank God daily for His electing mercy.

3) Limited or particular atonement

This teaching is vitally important in understanding the **purpose** of Christ's death on the cross. Certain questions arise: **whose** punishment did Christ bear? Whose salvation did He actually procure? We know that all men cannot be saved because some will go into everlasting hell (Rev. 20:10,15). But did Jesus die for **all** men knowing that only **some** would benefit from that death? The answer is no! Jesus died actually to save God's elect (Eph. 1:4; John 17:9; Matt. 26:28). Christ's whole purpose in His first advent was to save His people from their sins (Matt. 1:21). Jesus gave Himself for the church (Eph. 5:25).

"Christ's atonement was **sufficient** to save all but it was efficient to save only the elect."¹¹ Christ is said to have been a ransom for His people (Matt. 20:28). We should note He gave His life as a ransom not for all but for **many**. A ransom frees only those for whom it was intended.

When Jesus died, He shed His blood for the remission of sins. We know that His blood was the cup of the new covenant (Matt. 26:28). This passage says His blood was shed for many. It is quite clear that the shed blood **does accomplish** the purpose for which it was intended. Where the blood covers sin, salvation is apparent. Can there be an actual shedding of Christ's

blood for someone who never repents and goes to hell? The answer is an unequivocal - NO! No shed blood of Christ can fall in vain. It will save all for whom it covers and this in only the elect. Thus, the atonement is limited or particular.

Presbyterianism glories in the truth that Jesus died for those who God the Father had elected unconditionally before the foundation of the world.

4) Irresistible grace

There is a logical continuity in all the five points. As we have noted already, if man is unable to save himself, if God has elected some to salvation, if Christ has procured the salvation of these elect, then naturally God will provide the means for calling them to salvation.

By irresistible grace we mean that the Holy Spirit **will open** the eyes of the blind sinner, **He will free** him from his bondage to sin; He will enable him to hear the Gospel of truth; He **will** enable him to desire to seek God' and He **will** regenerate his deadened soul giving it life. This working of the Holy Spirit (commonly referred to as effectual calling) cannot be frustrated because God's purpose can never be thwarted (Dan. 4:35; Job 42:2; Ps. 33:11; Isa. 14:24; Eph. 1:11).

We see in the Scripture that God calls men to Christ and no man can come to Christ unless drawn (John 6:37,44). The children of God are those led by the Spirit (Rom. 8:14). Paul said he was called by His grace (Gal. 1:15). We see a vivid example of the Spirit's calling in Acts 16 where Lydia's heart was opened by the Lord (Acts 16:14,15). Other passages concerning the Spirit's effectual calling are Titus 3:5; Eph. 1:19,20; I Peter 2:9; John 3:3; Col. 2:13; II Cor. 5:17; Ezek. 11:19.

Presbyterians give praise to God that it was the Holy Spirit who enabled them to see the glorious Gospel of Jesus Christ and that it was the Holy Spirit that awakened their deadened soul. Is this not the testimony of genuine believers? Listen sometime to a person's testimony of how God worked the circumstances enabling him to be responsive to the Gospel. Essentially, what they are saying is that the Holy Spirit irresistibly called them to Christ.

5) Perseverance of the saints

It only follows that if God has elected some to eternal life if Jesus died to save these, and if God has called or drawn to salvation those who could not save themselves, then God will preserve those saved ones unto eternal life.

This doctrine states that it is impossible for those who are genuine Christians to be eternally lost. To believe they could be lost is a denial of fundamental truths in Scripture. Denominations, which deny this fifth point, state that there are some who once have believed but then have denied the faith. They refer to II Peter 2:20-22 and Heb. 6:4-6 as confirmatory passages. What these groups fail to grasp is that it is possible to profess Jesus Christ yet never genuinely be converted. Jesus illustrates such an occurrence in Matt. 7:20-23. It is possible to have a certain knowledge of Christ without being converted. It is such a situation that exists in II Peter 2:20-22 and Heb. 6:4-6. The parable of the sower (Luke 8:5-15) also illustrates this fact.

Presbyterians are merely saying that where there is a genuine conversion there will be **perseverance** to the end. He who perseveres is the one who is saved; he who falters and denies the faith demonstrates the true condition of his heart.

God sees to it that His work is completed in His people (Phil. 1:6; II Tim. 4:18). Jesus said none who are given to Him by the Father shall be lost (John 6:39; 10:28). A person who genuinely believes has eternal life (John 4:14; 5:24; 6:47,51; I John 5:11-13). The glorification of the believer is but the natural

sequence of God's providential work (Rom. 8:29). The elect cannot be led astray (Matt. 24:24; Mark 13:22). The mystic union between Christ and the believer guarantees continued steadfastness (John 14:19; Rom. 8:10; Gal. 2:20). We are sealed in Christ (Eph. 1:13,14; 4:30). God has promised to preserve believers from their own backsliding (Jer. 32:40). Believers are guarded by the power of God (I Peter 1:50; II Thess. 3:3; Ps. 34:7).

Jesus is the **author** of our salvation (Heb. 5:9; 12:2). How can we lose that which is not ours to lose. Praise God that He is faithful to preserve our souls to eternal life.

Presbyterians view the five points as precious gems in the theology of Scripture. They provide a great comfort to God's people. Those who fully realize that it was the sovereign God who awakened their deadened soul, that it was God who delivered them from the miry pit, that it was God who came to them when they were going astray are indeed the ones who can sing that great hymn, "Amazing Grace," with fervor as never before.

THE SACRAMENTS

Presbyterians believe that Scripture teaches there are only two sacraments - the Lord's supper and baptism.

These sacraments are a means of grace but never such a means apart from the Word of God. The sacraments, alone, are never sufficient unto salvation. "The Word and the sacraments differ in the following particulars: 1) The Word is absolutely necessary, while the sacraments are not, 2) the Word serves to beget and strengthen faith, while the sacraments can only strengthen it, 3) the Word is for all the world, but the sacraments are only for believers and their seed.¹²

The sacraments are **visible signs of inward spiritual graces**. The signs of the sacraments are water in baptism, and of bread and wine in the Lord's supper. The purpose of the signs is to point to that which is signified - namely the inward graces. These inward graces are the righteousness of faith (Rom. 4:11); the forgiveness of sins (Mark 1:4); faith and repentance (Mark 1:4; 16:16), and communion with Christ in His death and resurrection (Rom. 6:3,4; Col. 2:11,12).

The sacraments are a **seal** of God's new covenant with man. What is a seal? A seal attests to the genuineness or validity of what has taken place - namely that which God has promised has happened or will happen. The seal represents not man's ability but God's faithfulness and power. But in saying that the sacrament is a seal of inward grace we are not saying that the sacrament, in itself, **actually bestows** that

grace. However, the very nature of the sacrament does confirm and strengthen the grace when actually present.

Presbyterians refute the notion of baptismal regeneration - the idea that a person is saved by the administration of the sacrament. A person receiving the sacrament may prove that his profession of faith was false or an infant may grow up never embracing Christ as his Lord and Savior. This apostasy does not detract from the genuineness of the seal. Again, the seal represents what God promises. But these promises are never understood apart from man's responsibility to obey the covenant stipulations. Man must be a covenant keeper - that is repent and believe on Jesus Christ - in order for the seal of the sacraments to be effectual in his life.

John Murray comments on the relationship between the sign and seal of the sacraments:

It is apparent that as a sign or seal it should not be identified with that which is signified and sealed. That which signifies is not the thing signified and that which seals is not the thing sealed. The sign or seal presupposes the existence of that which is signified or sealed. Hence baptism is the sign and seal of a spiritual reality which is

conceived of as existing. Where that reality is absent the sign or seal has no efficacy. Equally pertinent is the observation that the sign or seal does not bring into existence that, which is signified or sealed. It does not effect union with Christ."¹³

The Lord's Supper

The Lord Jesus Christ instituted this supper during the time of the Passover just prior to His arrest and subsequent death (Matt. 26:26-29; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:19,20; I Cor. 11:23-25). This sacrament was tied with the Pascal meal of the Old Testament. The broken bread symbolized Jesus' broken body. The wine symbolized Jesus' shed blood. The eating and drinking of these elements point to the spiritual receiving of the benefits of Christ's sacrificial death. The supper is a reminder of His death. The person who partakes of the Supper is professing their faith in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior.

Presbyterians believe in the spiritual presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper. By this we mean that the benefits of Christ's office are present and actually conveyed to believers by the Holy Spirit. All who desire to participate are called to carefully examine themselves (I Cor. 11:28-32) so that they do not

partake in an unworthy fashion. This exhortation obviously rules out unbelievers, and it rules out children who have not yet come to a point of discretion in personally making a public profession of Christ.

Christian Baptism

Christian baptism was instituted after Christ's resurrection by Christ Himself (Matt. 28:19; Mark 16:6). Baptism is an initiation into the church of Jesus Christ. As an initiatory rite, baptism conveys primarily a twofold idea: **1) the washing with water, 2) union with Christ and His people.**

Concerning the first idea, the washing with water represents the cleansing of the participant. Water baptism signifies and seals the cleansing of the Holy Spirit. The Scripture emphasizes that sinners must be renewed by the Holy Spirit before they are engrafted into God's kingdom (I John 3:3; Ezek. 36:26,27; Titus 3:5). As baptism represents cleansing, it represents the Holy Spirit's work of regeneration.

Concerning the second idea, baptism is the sign and seal of our union with Christ and with His people. We see this idea conveyed in Rom. 6:3-6; I Cor. 12:13; Gal. 3:27,28; Col. 2:11,12. "We may say then that baptism signifies union with Christ in virtue of His

death and the power of His resurrection, purification from the defilement of sin by the renewing grace of the Holy Spirit, and purification from guilt by the sprinkling of the blood of Christ."¹⁴

The Mode of Baptism

The mode of baptism is another doctrine that has singled out Presbyterians from many denominations. Presbyterians believe that Scripture teaches the proper mode of baptism is that of **pouring or sprinkling**. We do not believe, as other denominations, that immersion is the only proper mode. Presbyterians do not deny the legitimacy of a baptism by immersion in a true church; however, we insist that Scripture nowhere proves that baptism **can only** mean immersion.

Immersionists insist that the Greek word "baptizo" means immerse, dip, or plunge. Hence, the mode of baptism only can be legitimately one of immersion. But Presbyterians equally insist that the key in understanding the mode of baptism lies in the use of the word in Scripture. Does "baptizo" always mean or imply immersion? The answer is **NO!** Heb. 9:8-22 demonstrates that a form of "baptizo" is used in connection with ceremonial cleansing done by the sprinkling of blood. Heb. 9:10 points out that Old

Testament ritual "baptisms" were only types and shadows of true spiritual realities. Heb. 9:13,14 demonstrates that a **cleansing is performed by sprinkling** with blood. Heb. 9:19 speaks of a mixture of water and blood being sprinkled on the entire tabernacle because all things were to be cleansed by blood. Therefore, Presbyterians insist that if "baptizo" can only mean immersion then how do we account for the word referring to baptisms performed by sprinkling?

In Acts 1 and 2, we see the teaching of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Pentecost is prophesied as an event to be called the baptism of the Holy Spirit. In Acts 2 the "baptism" occurred (also see Acts 11:15,16). This baptism is called a "**pouring**" out of the Spirit (Acts 2:15-17,33; 10:44,45). As previously noted, there is a close relationship between the Holy Spirit and water baptism. The Spirit is always said to be poured or sprinkled (Titus 3:5; Prov. 1:23; Isa. 32:15; 44:3; Ezek. 36:25-28).

Presbyterians simply say that the evidence of Scripture points to pouring and sprinkling as the proper modes of baptism. The immersionist's arguments, under close scrutiny, do not hold up.

The Recipients of Baptism

Presbyterians recognize two groups as legitimate candidates for Christian baptism: **1) adult believers, 2) infants of believing parents.**

When Jesus instituted the rite of baptism He was thinking of adult baptism (Mark 16:16). A profession of faith was to precede the baptism. On the day of Pentecost those that received and preached word were baptized (Acts 2:41). Hence, the Presbyterian Church requires all adults seeking baptism to give reasonable evidence that they have repented and trusted Christ alone for salvation.

The second group that Presbyterians acknowledge as legitimate recipients for baptism is the children of **believing parents**. Infant baptism, along with the doctrine of predestination, is one of the doctrines that most people associate with Presbyterianism. Objectors to this doctrine insist that infants cannot exercise faith and that no command is given in the New Testament to baptize infants. But is this ground for denying the doctrine? Not at all! Presbyterians insist not only the legitimacy but also the necessity for believing parents to baptize their children.

Infant baptism is rooted in a covenantal view of Scripture as presented earlier. There is a continuity or

unity of God's covenant of grace. One of the keys in understanding the necessity for infant baptism is to understand the role of **circumcision** in the Old Testament. This was the **sign and seal** of Gods covenant with His people (Gen.17: 10,11,13,14). It is vital for us to note that circumcision was the covenant sign in its deepest spiritual meaning.

Three basic ideas are conveyed in the symbol of circumcision. First, it was the sign of **union and communion** with God (Gen. 17:7,11). As noted earlier, the heart of the covenant was the thematic phrase, "I will be your God and you will be my people." Circumcision was the sign of that covenant promise.

Second, it was the sign of the **removal of defilement**. It represented cleansing from sin (Deut. 30:6; Isa. 52:1; Jer. 4:4; 6:10; 9:25,26; Ezek. 44:7-9).

Third, it was the **seal of the righteousness of faith** (Rom. 4:11). Circumcision was vitally related to faith. Abraham received the sign as a symbol of his faith. The rite pictured and sealed internal faith. Of course, it must be remembered that it only represents faith and is not the cause of faith.

The significant concept is that circumcision was **commanded** to be administered to **infants**, (Gen.

17:12). Hence, the covenant in its fullest meaning was to be given to infants.

Since the Scripture is an essential unity we must insist that where there is no command in the New Testament either implied or expressly given which abrogates an Old Testament principle, we must then assume the continuing validity of such a principle. This principle may take on a different manifestation, but it will be present. This means that the principle seen in circumcision as the sign of God's covenant should be seen in the New Testament as well. And this we do see. The New Testament affirms the principles of family solidarity, and infant inclusion in the covenant community. Moreover, we see "baptism" as replacing circumcision as the sign of God's covenant.

We do see where God repealed the rite of circumcision as the covenant sign (Gal. 5:2ff; Acts 15:1,2,5,6,24). Circumcision was replaced with a bloodless covenant sign. The key passage demonstrating the change of covenant signs is seen in Col. 2:11,12. Baptism superceded circumcision as the covenant sign. The continuity, of God's covenant of grace is magnified. What was true in the principle of circumcision was now true of baptism. Baptism is now the initiatory rite into God's covenant

community, whereas, before it was circumcision (Gen. 17:9-14 compared with Acts 2:41). Baptism is now the sign and seal of God's gracious covenant of love toward His people (Gen.17 compared with Gal. 3:27-29). Baptism is now the sign of the covenant in its deepest spiritual meaning (Gen. 17 compared with Acts 22:16; 18:8).

The inescapable conclusion is that if infants were recipients of the Old Testament covenant sign then the continuity of the covenant demands believing parents, today, to baptize their infants. For an excellent presentation of this doctrine of infant baptism see Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr.'s tract entitled, **Infant Baptism: A Duty of God's People.**

CHURCH GOVERNMENT

Presbyterians are confident that their form of church government is the closest approximation to the apostolic church. Christ is seen as the head of the church (Eph. 1:22.23). He exercises His rule of the church through His word and Spirit and through the ministry of men (Eph. 4:10-12).

The term "Presbyterian" is derived from the word "presbytery." Presbyterianism means "a rule of the presbyters (elders)."

Key Features of Presbyterianism

1. There is a **plurality of leadership** consisting in two offices ordained by God. These offices are a) elder, b) deacon. For an excellent presentation of the biblical qualifications for elder and deacon see Roland Barnes' booklet, *Selecting God's Men*.

A) Elder

The elders (presbyters) are ordained by God to exercise spiritual oversight over the congregation of God (Acts 14:23; 11:30; 15:2,6,23; 16:4; 20:17; 21:18; I Tim. 3:1-7; 5:17-20; James 5: 14; I Peter 5:1-3; Heb. 13:17).

There is normally a distinction made among elders. Some are referred to as "ruling elders" and others as "teaching elders." The ruling elders exercise their spiritual oversight through the teaching, visitation of the sick, comforting the mourning, nourishing and guarding the children of the church, praying with and for the people, and carefully seeking to see that fruit is produced among the people in response to the preached Word.

Teaching elders are those who are particularly set apart to labor in word and doctrine (I Tim. 5:17). These elders are commonly called "pastors" or "ministers." Their function, in addition to that

performed by ruling elders, is to expound and preach the Word and administer the sacraments.

The distinction, which exists between the elders, is not one of **authority** but of **function**. This is referred to as **the parity** of elders. There is no evidence of a hierarchy in the churches. The qualifications are the same for both (I Tim. 3:1-7).

Churches are to be governed by a **plurality of elders**. Every church in the New Testament had several elders (Acts 14:23). Every city was to have several elders (Titus 1:5).

Elders are to be **elected by the congregation**. In Acts 14:23 the Greek word used for appointing elders literally means, "to cause to vote by a stretching out of the hand."

Furthermore, the elders are given a real authority not exercised by the congregation at large. Some of the gifts of the Spirit were not meant for all (Rom. 12:6-8; I Cor. 12:28). The office was entered into by a solemn rite (ordination) which is not automatic with conversion (I Tim. 4:14; 5:22). This office carries with it a title of authority: "rule" (I Tim. 5:17), "Overseer" (Acts 20:28, "shepherd" (I Peter 5:1,2), "care for" (I Tim. 3:5). This office demanded higher

qualifications not normally demanded of Christians in general.

B) Deacon

Deacons are ordained primarily to a position of service (Acts 6:1-6). And their spiritual qualifications were just as high as those of elder (I Tim. 3:8-10). The deacons minister to those in need, to the sick, the friendless, or any in distress. They collect the tithes and gifts of the people and distribute these. They care for all the physical property of the congregation. In the overall discharge of their duties the deacons are under the supervision of the Session (the meeting of the elders).

2. Presbyterianism is a **connectional church**. By this we mean that church government is comprised of lower and higher courts which have authority over single or multiple churches.

The Jerusalem council of **Acts 15** demonstrates the connectionalism of the churches and the jurisdiction exercised by a given body. The matter was debated before the council (Acts 5:4,19). And the matter was adjudicated by the elders and not by democratic consensus among the congregation (Acts 15:6). Furthermore, the council of Jerusalem rendered a judicial decision regarding a problem in the church of

Antioch. This judicial decision was sent back to the court of origin (Acts 15:20-23). The decision was binding (Acts 15:28; 16:4), and it was passed to the other churches to be obeyed (Acts 16:4).

The Presbyterian Church seeks to follow the connectionalism in the apostolic church by its various courts which are: 1) the Session, 2) the Presbytery, 3) the General Assembly.

The **Session** is comprised of the elders of a local church who have authority over a single church.

The **Presbytery** is the next highest court, which is comprised of multiple churches in a given geographical area. It has full jurisdiction over all the churches in its boundaries. Teaching elders are examined and approved on a Presbytery level and then commended to the church desiring his ministry. Issues not settled on a Sessional level can be appealed to the Presbytery court.

The **General Assembly** is, in reality, an extended Presbytery covering a nation. It is the court represented by all the denomination's churches. It constitutes the bond of union, peace and correspondence among all its congregations and courts. The General Assembly is the highest court of

appeal. It adjudicates matters unable to be rendered by the Presbyteries.

CONCLUSION

Obviously, not every single belief of Presbyterianism was set forth in this presentation. The purpose was to explain major distinctives, which historically have singled out Presbyterians from other denominations. Also, these major distinctives can serve as an introductory aid to those who are curious about what we, Presbyterians, believe. And, these distinctives can serve as a valuable aid to the church leadership in helping new church members (and old one ones as well) in understanding the basic teaching of their church.

Presbyterianism is a denomination with a rich heritage - namely one that stands upon the never changing foundation of God's Word. We are a people of the "Book." We are a people who give praise, glory, and honor to the providential God who called us out of darkness into His marvelous light. And we are a people who are dedicated to the task of bringing every thought captive to the obedience of Christ. We live for one purpose - to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.

END NOTES

- 1 Witherow, Thomas, The Apostolic Church, p. 17.
- 2 Berkhof, Louis, Manual of Christian Doctrine, p. 27.
- 3 Robertson, O. Palmer, The Christ of the Covenants, p. 4.
- 4 Ibid., p. 14,15.
- 5 Berkhof, Systematic Theology, p. 277.
- 6 Robertson, p. 57.
- 7 Ibid., p. 28.
- 8 Manual of Christian Doctrine, p. 47.
- 9 Seaton, W. J., The Five Points of Calvinism, pp. 6, 7.
- 10 Ibid. p. 8.

11 Boettner, Loraine, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, p. 152.

12 *Summary of Christian Doctrine*, p. 165.

13 Murray, John, *Christian Baptism*, p. 86.

14 *Ibid.* p. 8.