

Why Am I a Presbyterian?

by Abigail Rian Evans

Why am I a Presbyterian? Let me count the ways, à la Elizabeth Browning:

I Was Born a Presbyterian

I have been a Presbyterian since birth, although my parents were originally Lutheran and Methodist. I was first conscious of what this meant when I was four years old, sitting on a sofa in my living room next to Scottish Presbyterian biblical scholar John Murray, who taught at Westminster Theological Seminary. He said to me, “Abigail, you are a child of the covenant.” Being a child of the covenant meant spending Sunday afternoons memorizing the Shorter Catechism, not going to movies, not having alcohol in our home, and having nightly family devotion readings from scripture and various devotional books. While others were talking about television shows such as “I Love Lucy,” my family was debating the finer points of Calvinism, TULIP, supralapsarianism and predestination.

I have experienced many different branches of the Presbyterian Church. I grew up in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, then in high school participated in the United Presbyterian Church (UPC), later was a missionary under the Brazilian Presbyterian Church, a synod executive with the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS, the Southern church) and then, with reunion, a minister in the PC(USA). I was ordained in 1969 at Ebenezer Presbytery, Eastern Kentucky, Appalachia. This journey began when I experienced a call to the pastorate at a Billy Graham Crusade at the old Madison Square Garden in 1957. Upon returning home to North Dakota where my father was the president of a small, Presbyterian university, Jamestown College, I encountered the then-stated clerk of the UPCUSA, Eugene Carson Blake, who was visiting. I came bouncing into the living room, full of excitement with my sense of call to the preaching ministry. Blake replied, “You can forget about being a pastor or preacher, Gail, but as a woman, you can teach theology, like Georgia Harkness.” That he was proven wrong is a credit to the Presbyterian Church, which had just voted to ordain women. When I came to Princeton Theological Seminary, out of 900 students, only five were women. There were only two of us women in the B.D. ordination track. Needless to say, sexism was alive and well.

Scripture Is Central; Interpretation Varies Greatly

Reformed worship is characterized by a dual emphasis on the Word and Sacrament, though in practice it emphasizes the Word. *Sola scriptura*, not Church authority, was the motto of the Reformers. The range of debate through the history of the Protestant church reflects clearly that Christ alone is Lord of the conscience, an understanding of which leads to individual interpretations of Scripture. The contemporary debates, including those about the ordination of women and gay people, give clear evidence of the diversity of interpretation of particular texts. The twentieth-century theologian Karl Barth shifted the historic interpretation of scripture from an individual interpretation to understanding Christ as the living Word. This declaration moves the Protestant church away from a biblicism that makes the Bible our pope. The dilemma for contemporary Christians is between making the interpretation of scripture totally subjective, with no referent, versus a rigid fundamentalism that requires a dogmatic interpretation of texts. The PC(USA) ordination vows ask the candidate, “Do you accept the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be, by the Holy Spirit, the unique and

authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the Church universal, and God's Word to you?" (G-14.0207b) Scripture is still the centerpiece of the Presbyterian Church.

Grace, Not Works, Is Emphasized

Luther's original issue with the Roman Catholic Church, to some extent, revolved around the tension between God's grace and our works. It is unfortunate that some theologians have tried to sever the relationship between them completely. Capturing this tension, Philippians 2:12-13 reads, "Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure." The book of James brings this tension together while describing the barrenness of faith without works.

For Presbyterians and other Reformed churches, grace is central. Acknowledging our universal brokenness, that we are all tainted by sin, puts us all equally in need of God's grace. This free gift of God is not merited or earned, but needs to be received in order to transform our lives. The Reformers recognized this centrality of grace in the face of a church that practiced a theology of indulgences. Furthermore, grace is not simply needed on an individual basis but in our relationships with community, nation, and world.

Dissent and Debate Are Allowed

Throughout my more than forty years of ministry, I have experienced controversy, conflict, debate, dissent, and division in the Presbyterian Church—but have seen it survive.

Five years ago, I was receiving letters from thoughtful Presbyterians with petitions both for and against Amendment B, and now I am receiving letters regarding the Task Force on Peace, Purity, and Unity of the Church report. Allowance for debate, with points of view ranging from a radical political agenda to conservative evangelical pietism, are embraced within the church. However, when debate becomes division, this can bring pain as people judge one another or claim to have a corner on the truth. There is no such thing as a pure church, but a true church, according to Calvin (*Institutes* IV.1.ix-x). Dissent is a strength of our denomination that becomes weakened when members split the church by separating over their differences, rather than working through them.

I grew up in the aftermath of the fundamentalist/modernist controversy. My father, upon graduating from Princeton Theological Seminary in 1927, left the denomination with J. Gresham Machen, a brilliant New Testament scholar and professor at the seminary. Actually, they did not set out to start a new church, but because they formed their own Board of Foreign Missions, they were thrown out of the church—hence, the birth of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. My father was defrocked by the United Presbyterian Church General Assembly as apostate. After 20 years of heading up the new denomination, he became convinced of the narrowness and judgmental attitude of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, with its "corner on the truth" mentality. He recanted—with a memorable speech on the floor of the Philadelphia Presbytery in 1946, with the then-president of Princeton Theological Seminary, John Mackay, lending his support to reinstate him in the United Presbyterian Church.

As a missionary in Brazil, I saw the results of several splits, starting with Carl McIntire and then Boanerges Ribeiro, which led to the formation of Igreja Independente, Igreja Unida, and eventually seven brands of Presbyterian churches. Presbyterians in Brazil are part of the Protestant minority called *crentes* (believers). However, when we were missionaries in the 1960s, we were called communists because we helped to organize labor unions. As a result of my husband's and my participation, the Roman Catholic hospital would not give us an incubator for our dying newborn, because it was rumored that we were hiding revolutionaries in our own kitchen. Later, we were expelled from Brazil, because—worse yet—we had studied with Karl Barth, an accused liberal.

Next, as evangelists in Pikeville, Kentucky, in the late 1960s, we were cast into the midst of the political and social debates over the coal industry, where power struggles were mirrored in the church. In New York City, as chaplain at Columbia University and associate pastor at Broadway Presbyterian Church in the 1970s, I was negotiating with students holed up in Hamilton Hall who were part of the radical political movement protesting the Vietnam War—and was called a “mini-skirted Jesus freak.” In the 1980s, I was on the National Capital Presbytery’s commission on withdrawing churches, to help keep them in the denomination. I have seen the hurtful results that unresolved conflict brings, in the form of schism and division, but the Presbyterian Church, though fragmented, has survived.

Diversity of Congregations Is Embraced

My own spiritual journey and service to the church has put me in touch with a tremendous diversity of Presbyterian churches. Having traveled and worked in ministry across the United States, Latin America, Africa, Southeast Asia, and Europe, I have seen how diverse Presbyterian congregations can be. In the Orthodox Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, I saw strict, plain Bible exposition. During my teenage years in Texas in the PCUS, I experienced an open, embracing, down-home religion. While I was in Chapecó, Santa Catarina, in the 1960s, the Brazilian Presbyterian Church, one of the fastest growing Presbyterian Churches, was marked by Bible studies in the jungle by flashlight. Unfortunately, the military *coup d’état* was mirrored by the right-wing takeover of the Brazilian Presbyterian Church in the 1960s. The religious community was not exempt from the formation of a *comissão de inquisição* at Campinas Theological Seminary, where we were among the thirty students and five professors expelled for “heresy.” Yet the witness of individual Christians was not dimmed.

In Eastern Kentucky, in the small coal-mining towns of Wheelwright, Drift, and McVey, the churches were more Baptist than Presbyterian. Many of the towns had experienced the downturn in the coal industry and lived out the truth in the mournful song, “I owe my soul to the company store.” At the end of the 1960s, these towns were left behind when the nation’s industry ceased to consume the coal products upon which these areas relied economically. The Vista workers from Johnson’s Great Society did, however, bring hope to these folks, perhaps more so than the church.

At New York City’s Broadway Presbyterian Church, across from Columbia University, there was a core of wealthy professionals from the suburbs, young musicians, university students, kids from Harlem, and homeless persons. After that, I became a synod executive for the former Southern Presbyterian Church, Synod of the Virginias, which embraced Virginia, West Virginia, Maryland, and Washington, DC. The Southern General Assembly was strongly programmatic and respected, viewing southern women leaders as competent—and the women, in turn, were not defensive. Moving north again in the 1980s to the metropolitan D.C. area, as assistant minister at Westminster Presbyterian Church and interim pastor of Sixth Presbyterian Church, and then Neelsville Presbyterian Church, I experienced a different kind of diversity that was cosmopolitan, ecumenical, and involved people from all nations. Children in the Palm Sunday parade at Sixth Presbyterian Church each wore traditional dress from their own countries. All of this provided an interesting counterpoint to my simultaneous Ph.D. studies at a Jesuit school, Georgetown University. Now I am at the bastion of Presbyterianism—Princeton Theological Seminary—but that too has changed, with about fifty percent of students Presbyterian, and the balance from twenty-two denominations and numerous countries. Our students come from predominantly mega-church or para-church movements. Some are joining the growing emergent church movement, and many have limited interest in Reformed theology.

Theology Is Applied to the Public Arena

Since 1960, the PC(USA) has taken positions on bioethics and health issues, beginning with the *Covenant of Life* paper. In an effort to take theology into the public realm, additional study papers have addressed human embryonic stem-cell research, abortion, reproductive issues, euthanasia, war and peace, guns, violence, racism, and alcoholism. These are thoughtful papers addressing the majority of issues plaguing our society, even if I disagree with some of their conclusions. Presbyterians have marched for civil rights, against apartheid, with César Chávez and the lettuce pickers in the 1970s, in protest of the wars in Vietnam and Iraq, and been arrested, beaten, and even tortured in some parts of the world. They have taken their faith to the marketplace and the highest spheres of government and power.

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Abigail Rian Evans (courtesy of Princeton Theological Seminary).]

A Democratic Form of Government Is Practiced

A recent candidate for ministry in my home presbytery, the National Capital Presbytery, expressed that she found the PC(USA) *Book of Order* to be a profound and helpful reflection on the way the church can structure itself for mission and ministry. Although we do not practice a pure form of democracy, such as public Greek forum, it is representative. A more inclusive polity based on a representative form of government allows for members of a congregation at least to be heard through representation. Unlike a Roman Catholic hierarchal structure, where encyclicals are *ex cathedra* and binding on their members, the General Assembly's positions on controversial issues are instructive, not required. However, the *Book of Order* is prescriptive for those who are ordained, as in the case of administering sacraments—where there are boundaries on how we interpret and administer them. Under this democratic form of government, everyone does not do what is right in their own eyes, but what is right under the authority of the Presbytery—in contrast to life under a congregational form of government, where each congregation decides for itself.

Would there be anything to cause me to leave the Presbyterian Church? Perhaps boring worship, with its rote participation, “the frozen chosen,” draggy hymns, and the feeling that an hour-long Presbyterian service seems longer than a two-hour Black Baptist service. As well, I have become tired of its incessant fixation on sex; beginning in 1978, it has been debating homosexuality. Amendment B did not settle this debate. Will the Peace Unity Purity recommendations bring us any closer? Unlikely.

In conclusion, however, as important as all of these reasons are, the overriding, pre-eminent reason why I am a Presbyterian is the teaching of God's grace as revealed in Jesus Christ. I could never have passed through the trials and tribulations and struggles of my life without being carried in God's arms and living in a state of forgiveness. Why am I a Presbyterian? Because God preordained it to be so.