



8. Presbyterian

Presbyterians are like we are because Presbyterians are Christians who believe there's more Holy Spirit in a bunch of us than in any single one of us.

This lesson will enable participants to consider the Presbyterian understanding of authority through discussion of

- Acts 15:19, 22–29
- Romans 3:23
- Micah 6:8
- 1 Peter 4:10
- Matthew 18:20
- 1 Corinthians 2:4–11

OPENING PRAYER

*Gracious and loving God,
as we gather to study Scripture and
consider its message for us today,
we pray that, by your Spirit, you will be present with us.
We give you thanks for this opportunity to study
the Bible together—
to read together,
listen to each other,
talk to each other,
and think together
about how best to live out our relationship with you
and with each other.*

From *Why Presbyterians Are Like That*, written by Rev. John Williams, Ph.D. Chaplain and Director of Church Relations Austin College, Sherman, Texas. Copyright © 2022 by the Office of Christian Formation in the Presbyterian Mission Agency of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and UKirk Collegiate Ministries.

*We are grateful for all who made it possible for us to be here
and do this today:
for pastors and teachers,
bible translators and scholars,
and fellow church members.
Help us understand and appreciate the gifts of all
who make up or support
the communities we are part of.
Amen.*

Community is an important but easily overlooked theme in the Bible.

There are many sincere and earnest Christians in our congregations and in our larger church who talk a lot about having “a personal relationship with Jesus” as though Christian faith doesn’t involve anybody except Jesus and a particular individual.

Presbyterians agree that faith should be personal. We believe God calls each of us individually to respond to grace through acts of service and worship.

But we don’t think faith can or should be private.

There are many stories in the Bible about individuals who have personal interactions and experiences with God. But the result of those individual experiences is that the individual is empowered and inspired to return to and actively participate in the faith community.

Presbyterians understand that, while we may well have personal, individual experiences with God, the result of those experiences will always be that we are called and sent into community with other Christians.

It’s all about community.

1

As a group, Presbyterians are appropriately confident that we are capable of using the brains God gave us to figure out how to live faithfully together in response to God’s gracious love. We also understand that no single one of us has all the wisdom, gifts, and insight necessary for us to discern the guidance of the Holy Spirit in any particular situation.

Presbyterians are often deservedly kidded for our hyper-organization and obsession with committees. We have a lot of rules about how we make decisions. But all of that

structure exists to remind and enable us to slow down and listen to each other. At its best, Presbyterian polity and organization helps the whole church gain access to the gifts that God has given through individuals to our communities and the world.

It is certainly true that many of the themes discussed in these “Why Presbyterians Are Like That” Bible studies are not exclusive or unique to Presbyterians. Lots of Christians talk and think about grace, justice, and sin.

Presbyterians are distinctive among Christians because of the way we understand authority in the church.

The word “Presbyterian” means “ruled, governed, or led by elders.”

We recognize that every church member can’t be present for every discussion and decision that affects the life and ministry of the church. So we identify and entrust individuals from within our faith community to pray, study, deliberate, and make decisions on our behalf about church life.

ENGAGING THE BIBLE

2

Recall the story of the Jerusalem Council in **Acts 15** that we discussed in the first study in this series, “Bible.”

That material was about why Presbyterians look to the Bible for vocabulary and categories to help us figure out which things matter more than other things.

There was disagreement in the early church about whether or not persons who converted to Christianity had to be circumcised. Leaders from various Christian congregations gathered in Jerusalem, talked to each other and listened to each other. They studied Scripture together and some of them changed their minds.

3

Now consider **Acts 15:19** and **22–29**.

ACTS 15:19

“Therefore I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God,”

This is James talking.

He had been a leader in the pro-circumcision camp.

But now, after participating in serious and respectful discussion with other church leaders whose perspectives were different from his, James changes his mind . . .

ACTS 15:22

Then the apostles and the elders, with the consent of the whole church, decided to choose men from among them and to send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leaders among the brothers,

The “apostles and elders” understand themselves to be acting “with the consent of the whole church.” That’s because they were specifically chosen to represent their particular congregations in the Jerusalem Council.

And they decide to send representatives from the Council out to individual churches with a brief, but authoritative letter.

ACTS 15:23

with the following letter: “The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the brothers and sisters of Gentile origin in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greetings.

The letter is addressed to various Christian congregations that are made up primarily of Gentile, not Jewish, Christians.

ACTS 15:24

Since we have heard that certain persons who have gone out from us, though with no instructions from us, have said things to disturb you and have unsettled your minds,

“Somebody’s been telling y’all you have to be circumcised if you want to be Christians, but it wasn’t us.”

Two things about that:

The authors of the letter are saying “We didn’t tell anybody to do that.”

Notice how the letter and its authors are assuming that they have some authority in these matters.

Also, it’s not hard to imagine why the mention of circumcision would be “disturbing and unsettling” for many new Christians.

ACTS 15:25–26

we have decided unanimously to choose men and send them to you, along with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, who have risked their lives for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ.

It's fair to ask why the Jerusalem Council participants didn't send women as well. Despite the fact that women were the first to learn that Jesus had risen from the dead (see **Matthew 28**, **Luke 24**, and **John 20**), the Christian church took much too long to recognize the gifts and wisdom of women in our life together.

ACTS 15:27

We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth.

"Our decision was unanimous."

"We got together and made a firm decision that we're happy to explain to you."

"We're sending out Barnabas, Paul, Judas, and Silas to explain our letter to you and answer any questions you may have."

"They were here and part of the Council."

"We trust them and you should too."

ACTS 15:28–29

For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell."

Don't overlook those first words in verse 28:

For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us

Notice that the authors of the letter, the participants in the Jerusalem Council, *presume* that the Holy Spirit was directing the deliberations and conclusions of the Council.

There's a tired, old, and not entirely inaccurate joke among Presbyterians that the most *Presbyterian* verse in the Bible is **1 Corinthians 14:40** (*all things should be done decently and in order*).

Yeah. We get it. We can get pretty obsessed about rules and structure.

But a strong argument could be made that these first words of **Acts 15:28** (*for it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us*) are actually the most succinct depiction in the Bible of the way Presbyterians understand authority in the church and the best way for us to seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Presbyterians believe there's more Holy Spirit in a bunch of us than in any single one of us.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- *What are the ramifications of this idea that the Holy Spirit works in groups of people?*
- *How does that affect the way you think about the Holy Spirit?*
- *How does it affect the way you think about committees?*

OTHER RELEVANT SCRIPTURE PASSAGES

4

Because we understand the truth and relevance of **Romans 3:23** (*all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*) Presbyterians never ascribe absolute, complete, inerrant authority in the church to any individual.

Because we recognize the truth and relevance of **Micah 6:8** (*what does the LORD require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?*), Presbyterians understand that “walking humbly” sometimes involves deferring to decisions made by our colleagues, even when we don’t agree with them.

Because we understand the truth and relevance of **1 Peter 4:10** (*Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received*), Presbyterians presume that each member of our community has received gifts from God that are intended to benefit our entire community and the entire world. We work hard to organize our life together in a way that enables each one of us to share our gifts within and beyond the church.

Because we understand the truth and relevance of the words of Jesus in **Matthew 18:20** (*For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them*), Presbyterians respond to God’s grace by worshiping, deliberating, and serving God together.

Although there are many stories in the Bible about individual encounters with God, those individual encounters never result in the individual being called away from the faith community. The individual encounters with God always result in the individual being sent back into the faith community, often with a specific call or commission.

5

Let's conclude this discussion of the Presbyterian belief that there's more Holy Spirit in a bunch of us than in any single one of us by considering **1 Corinthians 12:4–11**.

1 CORINTHIANS 12:4–6

Now there are varieties of gifts but the same Spirit, and there are varieties of services but the same Lord, and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates them in everyone.

We don't all have the same gifts.

None of us has all the gifts.

But each of us has some of them.

And they all come from the same place.

1 CORINTHIANS 12:7

To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

Whatever gifts we have come from God and are intended to be shared.

They're not just for us, they're for everybody.

1 CORINTHIANS 12:8

To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit,

Some of us have seen a lot and learned important and relevant things in other contexts.

Some of us know a lot.

Some of us communicate especially well.

1 CORINTHIANS 12:9

to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit,

Some of us are especially good encouragers.

Some are really good caregivers.

1 CORINTHIANS 12:10

to another the working of powerful deeds, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues.

Some of us are good at getting things done and completing tasks.

Some of us are good planners and dreamers and visionaries.

Some of us are good at cutting to the chase and articulating things clearly and concisely.

Some of us are compassionate observers and listeners and advocates.

1 CORINTHIANS 12:11

All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

We're not all alike.

We're not all identically gifted.

But we're all undeniably gifted.

That's how God rolls.

CONCLUSION

Presbyterians recognize that we are gifted people living among gifted people.

That's why Presbyterians believe there's more Holy Spirit in a bunch of us than in any single one of us.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- *What have we learned in these passages about God?*
- *Ourselves?*
- *Each other?*

BEST PRACTICES FOR PRESBYTERIAN BIBLE STUDY

- *What best practice for Presbyterian Bible Study can you articulate from Presbyterian recognition that there's more Holy Spirit in a bunch of us than in any single one of us?*
 - *How can the insights discussed above inform the way Presbyterians study the Bible?*
-