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On Being Presbyterian: Our Beliefs, Practices, and Stories
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P&R Publishing, Phillipsburg, NJ.

Introduction: Presbyterian Identity in the Postmodern Age

WHEN YOU THINK ABOUT WHO YOU ARE, what comes to mind? If you are like me, you could come up with a number of descriptors. For example, I am a son, raised in a typical American, upper-middle class family: my parents had two kids; we lived in the suburbs; my dad worked in cities; and my mom stayed at home with us. Because of my dad's work, we moved around a bit, mainly up and down the northeast corridor between New York City and Washington, D. C. (though my marriage license notes that my residency was Los Angeles County, California, when I got married). I am a husband and a father of four children. I am a pastor with a scholarly bent. I am a historian with a pastoral calling. I became a Christian when I was a teen, was a fundamentalist Baptist, but am now a Presbyterian. I am a writer. I am a voracious reader whose favorite authors include Mark Twain and Wendell Berry. I am a gardener. I am a sports fan, cheering mainly for teams from the state of Indiana. My favorite sport is baseball, but I follow all sports fairly closely. I am a fan of Bruce Springsteen and U2, but I also like country and bluegrass music. I prefer trucks over cars or minivans and manual transmissions over automatics. I only buy Fords, but when I follow NASCAR, I cheer for drivers of Chevys, particularly Jeff Gordon.

All of these descriptors hang together in Sean Lucas; together they combine for an identity that is unique to me. Indeed, we could say that my personal identity describes "the real me," my own personality. The way this identity develops, the way I became attached to the various descriptions above, has a lot to do with the way my life has

played out and intersected with others' lives. In other words, my *story* and my family's story have a lot to do with who I am and what I consider essential.

In addition to my story, I have done certain things and not others. In fact, certain things I do could almost be considered "rituals" because I do them with such regularity. Part of this, I am sure, has to do with being a guy. My wife and I used to laugh at the way I used to visit the same tollbooth on exit 26 of the Pennsylvania Turnpike (number eight, which was the center booth, and placed me in the proper position to get on US 1 heading north). More important practices for shaping who I am, though, must include the fact that I was an early reader; that I played baseball every spring and summer from age eight to eighteen; that my father generally purchased Fords and my father-in-law works for a Ford subsidiary; that my mom would stay up with me to watch the World Series every year; and that, from the time my parents professed faith in Christ when I was 9 or 10, I've rarely missed a Sunday worship service. Many of these *practices* have continued on with my own children and will shape their own sense of identity as they grow up.

Most important in shaping who I am have been my *beliefs*. I believe that marriage is a divine institution, that I promised to be faithful to my wife, and that divorce is not an option for us. I believe that God is the giver of life in the womb and that children are a blessing from the Lord. I believe that, while all lawful callings are God-ordained, those who desire to be pastors desire a good calling, a calling that is chief among equals, given its importance in the household of God. I believe that history can tell us a lot about who we were, who we are now, and what we ought to do and be in the future. I believe that we hold the creation as a stewardship, that God placed us here to be producers and not simply consumers, and that hard work is good work. Other beliefs are not as important, such as: the greatest and most difficult game invented by humankind is baseball (although golf is a close second on both counts); that I will catch a lot of flack from my family if I ever buy a vehicle other than a Ford; and that people (and sports teams) from Indiana tend to be superior to those from the rest of the

nation (as evidenced by my wife). These beliefs lead me to do certain repetitive practices, which in turn reinforce a story about who I am and to whom I belong.

When we say someone is having an "identity crisis," we mean to say that he has become disillusioned or is experiencing dissonance within the core of who he is. Perhaps he is questioning his fundamental beliefs, his core values. Perhaps the practices that defined him are now unfulfilling or have been taken away due to sickness or loss. Perhaps he finds out that the story by which he has lived does not make sense of reality as he now knows it. Whatever the case may be, this individual will begin searching for new beliefs, practices, and stories that will provide him with a stable identity. Not to do so would classify this person as having a "breakdown," leading to some sort of "dementia" (a form of mental insanity in which someone "lies" to himself, as in when someone goes around telling people that he is Superman). The most obvious type of identity crisis is what we call a "mid-life crisis," in which a man who has spent fifteen or twenty years in the work force finds that the beliefs, practices, and stories he had when he was first out of college are no longer sufficient or fulfilling. And so, this individual sometimes buys a fast car, flirts with younger women, or changes careers, all in an effort to find a new identity.

One more thing about identity. Our current "postmodern" age prides itself on promoting fluid identities. In premodern or even early modern societies, identity was created by social relations and family connections (e.g., John, the oldest son to a blacksmith, is raised in the family business in which he provides horseshoes for the village in which he lives; he in turn expects to pass this trade to his son, etc.). However, in the present, due to the mobility of society, the influence of technology, and the loss of family ties even within the "nuclear" family, identities are forged rather than inherited. As a result, postmodernity loudly proclaims that it is possible to create or recreate your identity countless times. Perhaps the best contemporary example of this is the pop singer Madonna, who, over the course of twenty years, has transformed herself from a "boy toy" to a Marilyn Monroe replica to tawdry woman about town to Jewish spiritualist. The

result of all of this identity creation is that people no longer hold core beliefs or master stories or shared practices; all that is left are identities that imitate sound-bites and thirty-second commercials, here today and gone tomorrow.

Now, why have I gone on at length about this issue of identity? And what does it have to do with “Presbyterian identity”? Those are fair questions. First, I wanted to describe “identity,” because it is one of those words that we use frequently without pausing to think about what we mean. This is particularly true when we talk about “religious identity.” But I also want us to begin to see how a particular type of identity is formed, as the confluence of *beliefs, practices, and stories*. And I needed to alert you to how, in our contemporary situation, this issue of identity is quite conflicted due to the “postmodern turn” of our society.

Above all, I want to suggest in the rest of this book that Presbyterian identity is formed through shared beliefs, practices, and stories. These three things work together to forge what one nineteenth-century Presbyterian theologian called the Presbyterian idiosyncrasies of mind.¹

PRESBYTERIAN BELIEFS

By Presbyterian beliefs, I am referring to “doctrine.” In fact, sometimes you will hear someone refer to the fact that Presbyterians are “confessional.” What we mean by that is that Presbyterian churches summarize their beliefs in confessions of faith. As opposed to those who have a limited statement of faith or those who have a “book of confessions,” conservative Presbyterians take the Westminster Confession of Faith very seriously. Perhaps you know that conservative Presbyterian churches require their pastors, ruling elders, and deacons to subscribe to the Westminster Standards, a seventeenth-century document that contains a thirty-three-chapter confession of faith and two catechisms, one “larger” and one “shorter.” By “subscribe,” we mean that we ask our officers to claim the beliefs of the Standards as their own, as their confession of what they believe the Bible teaches. While our churches do not require church members to affirm the beliefs con-

tained in the Westminster Standards, you should expect the preaching and teaching to conform quite closely to them for the simple reason that the officers have said in good faith that the beliefs contained in those documents are their own.

Of course, a large body of what Presbyterians believe is quite similar to beliefs of other evangelical Protestant churches. For example, conservative Presbyterians, along with other evangelical Protestants, believe in the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture, the Trinity, and the great doctrines of salvation, such as justification by faith alone, adoption, sanctification, and glorification. We also affirm together the divine-human nature of Jesus Christ, his substitutionary death on the cross, his physical resurrection from the tomb, and his ascension into heaven. All evangelical Protestants believe in the necessity of good works, an organization called the church, the reality of heaven and hell, and Jesus’ eventual return in glory. As noted in the preface, that is why I think Presbyterians *are* evangelical, because we hold to the centrality of the gospel, to the way it has transformed our lives, and to a deep desire to have other lives transformed by it as well. We have this gospel in common with all who believe that they are sinners and who are trusting in Christ’s blood and righteousness alone for their salvation—that is, with all who are *evangelical*.

It is important to state this simply. Too many who go under the label of “Presbyterian” or “Reformed” doubt whether other evangelicals really believe the gospel because they don’t speak it with a Presbyterian accent. Such was the case with one Presbyterian denomination in the 1950s that refused to join a council of churches because its membership included Baptists and others who believed that faith preceded regeneration, rather than the other way around. As a result, these Presbyterians concluded that their evangelical brothers believed a defective gospel and hence may not be brothers after all! Such an attitude is out of bounds. While we might have differing levels of fellowship and intimacy based on theological commonality, still we have to say that all who claim Jesus as Savior and Lord are our brothers and sisters in Christ. We also should want to say that we have a great body of truth in common with all those who are followers of our Lord.

That being said, there are several beliefs—several doctrines—that distinguish Presbyterians from other evangelicals. I will be explaining them in part 1. Presbyterians tend to stress five big ideas.

First, we believe in *God's sovereignty*. In other words, God is the King who created all things, governs over every sphere of life, and works together all things for our salvation. When we pray, “Our Father who art in heaven,” we are praying to the King (in heaven) whom we have come to know as “our Father.” We didn’t deserve this relationship—far from it. Rather, this relationship is rooted in God the King’s free choice to save. As a result, Presbyterians emphasize *the priority of grace*. God’s amazing grace meets our deepest need: we are sinners who need mercy. We don’t deserve God’s mercy, but God shows it to us supremely in Jesus’ death and resurrection on behalf of sinners like us. But God doesn’t stop with saving us from his wrath; he also transforms us by his grace so that we more and more bear the image of Jesus. And this grace keeps on working to lead us safely home.

Our individual stories, which God the King is working out in our lives by his grace, connect with his one big story, which he is working out in Scripture and history. That’s what we mean, preeminently, when we use the word *covenant*. We want to say that, in Holy Scripture, God is telling us one big story of redemption, focused on one people of God, that starts in the garden of Eden in Genesis and ends in the City of God in Revelation. We sometimes use the term *covenant of grace* to describe this story. There were some differences in the way this story took place in the Old Testament and in the New. The Old Testament, we could say, was a time of promise, and the New Testament is a time of fulfillment. But even with these differences, it is all one story that focuses on one person, Jesus Christ, the Redeemer of God’s chosen people, who has inaugurated God’s reign on earth—God’s kingdom—through his death and resurrection. And this story focuses on God’s promise to meet our needs in grace through Jesus Christ—his promise to be our God and for us to be his people. This story of God’s unfolding promise leads to the establishment of his reign in this world and among his people, the church.

Presbyterians understand the *nature of the church* a little bit differently from other evangelicals. We describe the church in a number of ways: as a people shaped by the Trinity and by the gospel, but also as a people defined in terms of space, character, and marks. Above all, we rely heavily on the distinction between the church as God sees it and the church as we see it. This gives rise to the language of the “visible” and “invisible” church. As we will see, the distinction is important not only for the way it helps us reckon with a number of thorny pastoral issues—particularly the problem of “apostasy”; it also provides a solid rationale for seeing our children as members of the visible church. Rather than upholding the ideal of “regenerate church membership,” like our Baptist brothers and sisters, we believe that the church that we can see, the visible, is made up by professing adults and their children.

Because this is the case, children of professing believers ought to receive the sign of initiation into God’s visible people—baptism. That means, of course, that Presbyterians embrace a different view of *the sacraments* from baptistic fellow believers. When it comes to baptism, we believe that God’s purposes have centered on households. In Genesis 17, God made promises to Abraham as the head of a household and gave him a covenantal sign—circumcision—that extended to his entire household and sealed those promises to his posterity. In Acts, the same thing is done, except now the covenant sign is baptism: God’s promise to grant Abraham’s blessings is given to believing heads of households, and the covenantal sign is extended to all the members of the household. Presbyterians also have a different understanding of the Lord’s Supper. We believe that, for those who receive the Supper in faith, something *happens*: namely, we enjoy the presence of the Lord himself. This does not happen through a transformation of the bread and wine into something they are not. Rather, it happens through the work of God’s Spirit in lifting our eyes and hearts to heaven where Jesus is in his glory. This is probably more than what most evangelical Protestants believe; they tend to think of the Supper as simply a memorial, a time of remembering that Jesus died. We believe that, too; but we also believe that the Supper is more than that.

PRESBYTERIAN PRACTICES

These beliefs don't stand in isolation from the rest of our lives as nice intellectual toys with which to play. Rather, these beliefs shape our practices and in turn are reinforced by those practices. When we talk about practices, what we mean are those repetitious actions through which our beliefs about God and his purpose for us are reinforced. You can think about practices as those activities which you do every day in your line of business. For example, every day when I reach my office, the first thing I do is check my e-mail. If there are any messages to which I need to respond, I do. In the midst of writing a response, the phone might ring. I always answer it the same way: "Hello, this is Sean Lucas." If there is an internal matter that comes up, I use the memo template in my word processing program to crank out my thoughts for others. I try to go down to the seminary library once a week and walk through the serials section, checking to see if there are any new journals in my field. I am sure that in your business, there are practices in which you engage every day as well. My beliefs about what my work should look like shape my practices and my practices reinforce these beliefs.

We can think about religious practices in the same way. Perhaps we can say that there are practices that we use as "we do business" with God and those which we use when "we do business" as the church. In the former, we engage with God through *practices of piety*. What we will find is that these practices of piety are profoundly tied up with corporate worship. The way we experience union and communion with God in Christ by the Spirit is through the preached Word, the sacraments, and prayer. But it does not stop there—we also move toward the world in service for others. We serve not because we can somehow earn favor with God. We serve out of profound gratitude for the grace that we have been shown by God the King. And so, these beliefs intersect with our practices of piety to shape the way we engage and are engaged by God for the sake of the world.

As we think about corporate *worship*, Presbyterians have generally held that worship is to be regulated by Scripture. What that means is

one of the hotly debated topics of our day, but at the minimum it must mean that Scripture norms the "elements" of the worship service. In the movement from being called into God's presence to confessing our sins to hearing God's Word and participating in God's sacraments, we participate in the renewal of God's covenant promises and the retelling of God's gospel story. As a result, our beliefs deeply influence the way we worship and are reinforced by our worship practices.

Most of the time in worship, Presbyterians like to do things "decently and in order" (1 Cor. 14:40). But our penchant for orderliness really comes through as we do the business of the church. This brings us to another set of practices, which could be lumped under the heading *church government*. Because God is the King and he rules especially in the church, Presbyterians have thought quite a bit about how God's authority is granted to the church, how it is mediated, and how it is to be used. As a result, we argue that God in Christ is King over the church and he gives elders as gifts to Christ's church to oversee and shepherd his people. These elders are responsible not only for their own local congregations, but for all of the churches in a given geographical area. The elders gather in higher "courts" of the church—such as presbytery and General Assembly—in order to express their care for the work of the whole church.

Another aspect of church government that sets us apart is that we have a document that regulates what we as Presbyterians can and cannot do as churches. This is called the Book of Church Order (usually abbreviated BCO, which you may hear some people pronounce as "Boco"; you'll also find that Presbyterians love acronyms and abbreviations). The BCO regulates everything from the nature of a mission church to the calling of a pastor, from the process for ordination to the process of church discipline, from the resignation of ministers to the dissolution of local churches. As elders, we try very hard in our various meetings to root everything we do in the BCO (the underlying principles of which are, in turn, rooted in the Bible). It is not unusual, when some difficult question is before a session (the local church's body of governing elders) or presbytery, for all of the men present to consult various sections of their own copies of the BCO.

This sets us apart from many evangelical churches that have limited constitutions, which are rarely consulted. It means that we may do things a little slowly and in line with the niceties of parliamentary procedure, but we are all doing the same thing “decently and in order.” Even more, these practices reinforce our belief that we are not the kings of the church; rather, God in Christ is the King and he is ruling in our midst through his Word and Spirit. Our practices are informed by our beliefs and our beliefs are reinforced by our practices.

PRESBYTERIAN STORIES

As a historian, I probably lean toward believing that this may be the most important part of our Presbyterian identity. That, of course, is not true; what we believe is more important than the stories about we who believe(d). Yet the stories that we tell about ourselves provide clues for what beliefs and practices we cherish and why we cherish them. One temptation we must avoid is to conclude that the larger Presbyterian story is unimportant. Because conservative Presbyterians had to leave the old-line Presbyterian Church (USA) to form new denominations, we may think that the *really* important part of the story is that which led to the creation of our own denominations. Not only is this line of thinking terribly naïve, but it also robs us of what is rightfully ours: we are Presbyterians, and we have as much right to stand in the line of Presbyterian teaching and life that goes back to John Calvin, and beyond him to the apostles, as those who belong to the old-line Presbyterian church.

That is why the third part of this book will briefly remind us of the Presbyterian story. This is vitally important for understanding why our churches are the way they are. John Calvin, John Knox, and the Westminster divines—theologians who lived in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—directly influence the way things are done in the PCA today. Do you doubt that? Listen to any sermon preached in a PCA church and you will more than likely hear a quote from Calvin or a statement from the Westminster Standards. You will also hear thoughts from Jonathan Edwards, the eighteenth-century sometime

Presbyterian pastor, or Charles Hodge, the nineteenth-century Presbyterian theologian. Not only are old, dead Presbyterians quoted often in the PCA, but their thoughts and conflicts have shaped both the beliefs that the church holds dear and the way in which the church did and does its business of worship and government.

And then, of course, there is the entire story of how conservative Presbyterian denominations came to exist during the last century, through the heroic efforts of ministers like J. Gresham Machen and Robert G. Rayburn in the North and ruling elders like Jack Williamson, Kenneth Keyes, and Bob Cannada in the South. How our churches came into existence influences how we do things today; in the PCA, this is demonstrated in everything from our denominational “askings” from the local churches (instead of per capita taxes) to our belief that congregations control their own property for their own purposes and not for those of the denomination. We will not be able to get into all the ways in which our story shapes who we are today; that will have to await the bigger book to which I referred in the preface. But we will make a few suggestions about this and, hopefully, you will be able to think about others in your own context.

It is my prayer that this book will help to explain to you what being Presbyterian is all about—what beliefs move us, what practices shape us, what stories we tell about ourselves. In the end, the most important thing is not that your identity is Presbyterian, but that your identity is shaped by Jesus Christ. For if you put your wholehearted faith in Jesus, you are united to him and receive all the benefits of salvation: you are declared right with God, you are adopted into his family, you are set apart and are made holy in God’s sight, and you are glorified. This union with Christ is spiritual, mystical, real, and inseparable—it marks you with a *Christian* identity, as belonging to God the King by his amazing grace. It places you in the unfolding story of God’s people of promise, stretching back through the history of the church to the story of Israel. It points you forward to God’s reign finally manifested fully on earth at the end of the age. And it places you in God’s blood-bought people, the church. That identity—believer united to Jesus Christ—is the most important; and if that identity is

not yours, then you should speak with a friend, loved one, or pastor who can show you from Scripture how to enter into right relationship with God through faith in Jesus. You will begin a journey of faith that I hope will lead you to walk with faithful Presbyterians around the world and in your own neighborhood for God's glory.

P A R T O N E

» *Presbyterian Beliefs*