

Presbyterianism



In the Church of Scotland, we describe ourselves as ‘presbyterian’, and sometimes our members aren’t entirely sure what that means. Other people describe us as ‘presbyterian’ too, and sometimes they have strange ideas about what they mean!

Sometimes, people think that Presbyterianism is a description of the way we worship. Look at different congregations within the Church of Scotland, or look at church traditions across the world calling themselves ‘presbyterian’, and you’ll find such a rich variety of practice that you’ll quickly realise the word doesn’t

describe a single form or style of worship.

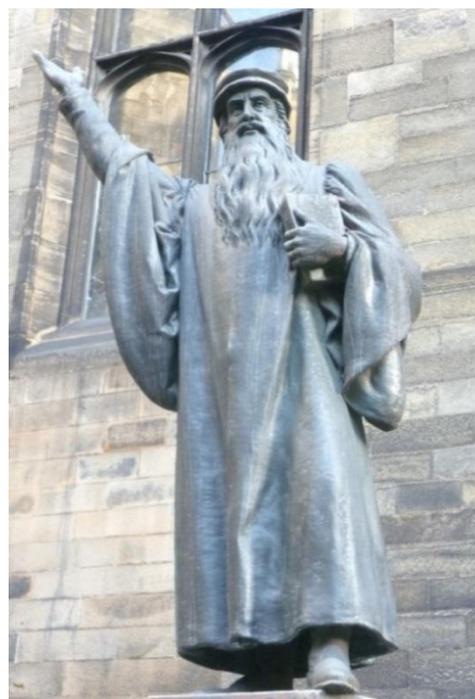
Sometimes, people think that Presbyterianism is a description of what we believe, and it can be used by people who want to describe something they think must be dour or strict or dull. Look at the differences of opinion we have inside our Church, or the differences of approach across the international presbyterian family, and you’ll realise once more that the word is not describing a single set of beliefs.

So, What is Presbyterianism?

Presbyterianism is, in fact, a method of governing a denomination; it’s about structure, polity, and decision-making. It’s very often the structure of denominations, which trace their origins back to the Reformation in Geneva led by John Calvin and others, which inspired the Reformation in Scotland under figures such as John Knox. And it’s found, too, in the second-generation churches established by older ones; so you find Presbyterian Churches throughout the Commonwealth, often ‘daughters’ of the Church of Scotland.

Presbyterian vs Reformed?

There is an overlap between Churches that call themselves ‘Presbyterian’ and those that call themselves ‘Reformed’ (with a capital ‘R’). The Reformed tradition is more of a theological brand, so it includes denominations whose





governance structures are a bit different. However, in many places, including our Church, the two words are used virtually interchangeably.

A System of Government by ‘Presbyters’

Presbyterianism might be described as a system of government by ‘presbyters’, and, for us, that means government by ministers, deacons and elders gathered in the Kirk Session, the local Presbytery, and the annual General Assembly. You could have any number of courts in the pattern; nowadays we have three. Don’t get hung up on the ‘Presbytery’ as a court, and don’t imagine that its name means it’s more important than the other courts. Lots of people serve on Kirk Sessions and the General Assembly without ever being members of a Presbytery. And, it would be quite possible for a Church to call their local area court by another name (e.g. Synod) and not use the word ‘Presbytery’ at all. It’s the whole multi-court system that is distinctive.

If you think of all the possible ways of making decisions, you could lay them out on a line. At one end would be systems where one person makes the decisions, or decisions are made by a few very powerful people. At the other end would be systems where every member has an equal say. There are religious organisations that are like each of these models. In the middle, are systems where a number of people have the job of making the big decisions - not everyone, but the right people for the job. In Presbyterianism, those people are the spiritual leaders, chosen for the gifts and graces and charisma the Church believes they possess, ordained permanently to their very special roles, and then appointed to tasks, jobs and courts, to carry out their calling.

So, when people say that Presbyterianism is democratic, you might want to qualify that, because lots of decisions (not all, but many) are not made by all the members but by the people ordained to that task. It’s fair to say, however, that we think we’re quite democratic in that no really big decision is ever left to one person to make.

Further reading and resources

Marjory MacLean (eds), *Legal Systems of Scottish Churches*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009).

Office Bearers Online - www.churchofscotland.org.uk/resources/office_bearers

The Church of Scotland Presbytery list - www.churchofscotland.org.uk/contact_us/presbytery_list