

How to Speak Presbyterian

By P. J. Southam

It has been estimated that 58 percent of the members of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) did not grow up in the denomination. For members and friends of the First Presbyterian Church in that category, here is a short rundown of the lingo you are likely to hear in a Presbyterian church that you may not have heard in another church.

Communion table or the Lord's Table

This is the table at the front of the sanctuary that holds the bread and the wine for the sacrament of Communion. Sometimes other items are placed on this table, such as the Bible, a cross, or candles.

The reason this is called the Lord's Table rather than an altar is that on the night in which Jesus was betrayed, when he was eating the Passover meal with his disciples, they were sitting at a table (Luke 22:14).

An altar is a place for making sacrifices. In the Reformed tradition we believe that Jesus' sacrifice on the cross was sufficient once for all. This sacrifice does not have to be repeated with a Mass or other Communion on an altar.

Lord's Supper

This is the meal we share at the Lord's Table when we eat the Bread and drink the Cup. Some churches call this meal Communion or the Eucharist. Eucharist is from the Greek word for "thanksgiving," which is what Jesus did before he gave the bread and wine to his disciples. Presbyterians believe in and practice two Sacraments: Communion and Baptism.

Session

This is the group of people, elected by the congregation, who make the decisions for the running of the local church. In some churches this group is called the church council or vestry

Elders

The session is composed of elders. This doesn't have to do with age so much as those who are considered competent and wise enough to make good decisions. There are two kinds of elders, "ruling elders" and "teaching elders." The ruling elders come from the congregation and are elected to serve in three-year cycles. The teaching elder is the pastor. This person is called a teaching elder because a pastor has to go to a lot of school to get the education to preach and teach proper doctrine.

The pastor is also called the minister or a "Minister of Word and Sacrament."

Presbytery

The presbytery is made up of a group of churches usually in a certain geographical area. The presbytery meeting includes "presbyters," both ruling and teaching elders, who gather to make decisions affecting the presbytery. By having their representatives gather together as a group, congregations both support each other and are held accountable to each other. First Presbyterian Church is a member of the Presbytery of the Whitewater Valley (<http://www.whitewatervalley.org/>)

Moderator

This is the person who chairs a meeting of elders or deacons or a presbytery or committee meeting. In a club or other gathering he or she would be called the "chairperson" or perhaps "president." While the moderator of a board of deacons is usually a deacon, the moderator of a session is a teaching elder, that is, the pastor. The moderator of a presbytery may be either a teaching elder or a ruling elder.

Book of Order

This is the rule book for the Presbyterian Church. It contains the guidelines for church life, including structure, worship and collective action. It not only tells us how to do things but also explains why. It was developed and can be amended by the General Assembly, with the ratification of a majority of the presbyteries

General Assembly

Every two years all the presbyteries in the country elect commissioners or representatives to a meeting of the General Assembly. The General Assembly makes decisions for the church as a whole. This is where Presbyterians become a national rather than a local church.

Commissioners

These are the folks, a proportionate number of ministers and elders, elected by the presbyteries to go to General Assembly. Rather than being instructed in how to vote at the Assembly by their presbytery, the commissioners as a body seek to discern the will of the Holy Spirit.

Election

No, this doesn't refer to how commissioners are selected to go to the General Assembly. It is a theological term that means God makes the first move in acting to redeem sinners. People within the covenant of faith are called "the elect." Reformed (or Presbyterian) theology teaches that we are incapable of saving ourselves from our sins, and that God "elects" or "chooses" to save us

Predestination

This word, similar to *election*, often raises questions for people of other denominations. Basically predestination means that our election by God occurred not only before we

were born, but so far back in time that it happened "before the creation of the world" (see Ephesians 1:4)

Debts and debtors

When we pray the Lord's Prayer we use the words *debts* ("forgive us our debts") and *debtors*. Some Christians say "trespasses" or "sins." This is because two versions of the Lord's Prayer are found in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, and in the original Greek two different words that mean "to sin" are used. In Matthew's version the word used means "to owe a debt," but a debt of sin, not money.

John Calvin and John Knox

In the Presbyterian Church you will frequently hear of the two Johns, Calvin and Knox. John Calvin was a French Reformer who followed in the footsteps of Martin Luther in the 1500s. He gave us the theological foundations for our church, so we have named a lot of things after him. John Knox was a Scottish preacher who brought the teachings of John Calvin to Scotland and got the Presbyterian Church going in that country, so we have named a lot of things after him too.

This is just a start to understanding Presbyterian lingo. If you hear a word that is new to you and want to know what it means, ask your teaching elder (pastor or minister) to explain it to you. And don't let him or her off the hook until you have an answer.

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