

Presbyterian Questions, Presbyterian Answers

Revised Edition

Donald K. McKim

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Preface to Revised Edition

This book was published in 2003, followed by *More Presbyterian Questions, More Presbyterian Answers* in 2011. I am grateful both books have been used extensively throughout Presbyterian churches and that folks have found this approach helpful in understanding Presbyterian theology.

Recent changes in the *Book of Confessions* and the *Book of Order* of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America [PC(USA)] have meant it is useful to update the books to reflect the addition of the Confession of Belhar to the *Book of Confessions* and present understandings and terminology in the *Book of Order*. Some other changes have been made along the way, including the addition of a few more questions and answers. For superb help and suggestions about what to modify here, I would like to thank David Maxwell of Westminster John Knox Press. His comments have been very valuable. My thanks also to David Dobson and Julie Tonini of the press for their support and splendid work.

The need for these modifications highlights that change is a feature of our Christian faith and that Presbyterian understandings and expressions, particularly in the PC(USA), do take place—by the leading of the Spirit of God, we believe. A theological way of understanding change is to see change as God moving us from where we are to where God wants us to be. Even when the changes seem relatively small, they still represent this action of God’s guiding providence. As it is in the church’s life, so it is in our own lives.

Changes in my life in these last years have led my beloved wife LindaJo and me to welcome daughters-in-law and grandchildren

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to our family. We now rejoice in life with Stephen and Caroline and their children, Maddie, Annie, and Jack; as well as with Karl and Lauren. These blessed members of the family God has given lead me to praise, thanks, and gratitude.

Changes come, within the church and in our own experience. As we move along, my hope is that these books will continue to benefit the church. May they be a blessing to all who seek further understandings and nurture in their lives of faith. May we all seek to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Pet. 3:18).

Donald K. McKim
Germantown, Tennessee
Advent 2016

Preface

Questions and answers are part of life. We face them every day. They are features of all areas of our existence. We ask; an answer is given. We are asked, and we reply.

So too in Christian faith. A classic definition of theology is that theology is “faith seeking understanding.” We believe in the Christian faith and so we are inevitably impelled, by our faith, to seek further understanding—to find answers to our questions. This is the nature of our faith. Christians are never content simply to say, “I believe,” and close their minds. We are people of faith who seek further understanding so that our knowledge of who God is and what God has done in Jesus Christ can grow. A stagnant faith becomes no faith. A vital faith is one that asks questions and seeks answers.

This is a book of questions and answers. It deals particularly with questions that arise in the context of that stream of Christian theology and belief we call “Presbyterian.” I am a Presbyterian. It has been my joy over nearly thirty years as a theologian in the pastorate and in theological education to listen to questions from Presbyterian persons about what Presbyterians believe. Many of these questions are also posed by those in other theological traditions. They are basic to Christian faith itself. But Presbyterians, as vital Christians, seek to enhance their faith by further understanding.

This book is written for laity and students. It tries to give brief answers to these “Presbyterian questions” in a succinct manner. I’ve written other books that deal in more detail with theological issues of interest to Presbyterians. These are listed in the “For Further Reading” section at the end of this book. I’ve tried here,

however, to begin with the questions that rise in Presbyterian minds that I've heard through the decades, over and over again.

My responses to these questions are intended to open doors to further thought, reflection, discussion, and study. I heard a sermon once titled "The Peril of the Easy Answer." The theme was that it is often easy to settle for "easy answers" and to avoid more difficult thought—to our peril. I hope my answers here will not be regarded as "easy" because they are brief, or in the sense that they are simplistic. I tried to write here as nontechnically as possible so that the responses are accessible to those with little or no previous knowledge of Presbyterian beliefs.

Presbyterians are part of the ecumenical church and the whole wide stream of Christian theology. But we do have a Presbyterian tradition of theology, often called "Reformed theology." I am fully aware of the varieties within the term "Presbyterian theology" and recognize we have a number of denominations today that are called "Presbyterian." At some points I have needed to say some Presbyterians believe this, some believe that on a certain issue. My own denomination is the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). This book will find most of its readers within this church family, I am sure. But I hope that Presbyterians in other Presbyterian denominations as well will find it useful and accurate. The book can serve, I trust, as a snapshot of Presbyterian beliefs for anyone in any church who is interested in this subject. I want to open doors to understanding Presbyterian beliefs through theological questions that are part of Christian experience and which Presbyterians ask.

Many more questions could be added to each topic here. The chapters are the traditional doctrines of theology. I have included a chapter on "Presbyterian History and Heritage" as well as one on "Polity" (church government), to say a bit about this aspect of Presbyterian theological practice. I have made a few citations from various confessional documents. For convenience sake, the *Book of Confessions* of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has been used as the reference source and abbreviated as *BC* in the text.

I would like to thank those who assisted with this project by providing their questions for consideration in this book. I have benefited from their kindnesses. Good help from former students

and friends in churches helped make these “real questions” and not just ones of my own devising.

My gratitude to my wonderful family, LindaJo, Stephen, and Karl McKim, is deep and never-ending. Their love and support make all my labors a joy.

This book is dedicated to our friends Rebecca and Ron Cole-Turner and Rachel and Lyle Vander Broek. Their care and love through the years have been a blessed part of our lives. It is also dedicated to my sister Thelma, her husband, Dave, and sons, Mark and Matthew Snyder, in gratitude for our family love.

Donald K. McKim
Germantown, Tennessee
Epiphany of the Lord
January 6, 2003

Ways to Use This Book

This book can be used in different ways.

Group Study. This book has thirteen chapters, designed so that groups in churches can study one chapter a week through a quarter of the church year. The questions for each chapter can be read by participants through the week. I hope this “easy-dose” approach will encourage participants to read each chapter and then discuss it when the group gathers weekly. I imagine each question/answer will evoke further questions or perspectives, which can be discussed by the group as a whole. I hope so! Of course, the time period for the group study can be extended into virtually any format. Church groups such as church sessions, new member classes, Sunday school, or adult study groups are contexts in which I trust this book will be helpful.

Individual Study. This book is also designed for individual study. I wrote it for those interested in knowing about Presbyterian beliefs. These may be persons who have a general interest, those who are considering membership in Presbyterian churches, those who are joining Presbyterian churches from other denominations, seminary students, or longtime Presbyterians who would like a focused look at our theological understandings. Individuals can use this book in nearly any way. I hope some will be encouraged to delve further into the many resources available so that their Christian faith will be enhanced by greater understanding.

1

Presbyterian History and Heritage

1 Where do Presbyterian churches come from?

Presbyterians are found all over the globe! Each particular Presbyterian congregation has its own history. The Presbyterian churches in a region or a country also have distinctive histories of their own.

Our “family tree” as Presbyterians extends back to Europe in the sixteenth century. We Presbyterians, in our various forms, trace our theological ancestry to the Swiss Reformation. Then, leaders of the newly emerging Protestant faith were witnessing to their Christian faith and were critical of beliefs and practices of the current Roman Catholic Church. The Protestant Reformation that began with Martin Luther (1483–1546) in Germany moved into Switzerland. There, however, other leaders arose who were critical of Roman Catholicism but did not fully agree theologically with Luther. These leaders became known as “Reformed.” Major figures were Huldrych Zwingli (1484–1531), John Calvin (1509–64), and Heinrich Bullinger (1504–75). Calvin became the most highly regarded of these leaders.

The beliefs of these theologians spread, and along with their theology a form of governing churches based on the centrality of “presbyteries” emerged. Thus the name “Presbyterian” became descriptive. Presbyterianism spread into Great Britain and then to what became the United States and Canada. Those who espoused Presbyterian theology also made their way throughout other countries, until today Presbyterian churches are found throughout all parts of the world.

Churches in the Presbyterian tradition are marked by similar theological beliefs and by a “presbyterian” form of church government. The theological standards or confessions of faith a Presbyterian denomination adopts in different countries or localities will vary. Presbyterians have always constructed confessions of faith in their various localities. So there is not one, single, “Presbyterian” document that is the official “confession” of Presbyterian churches. Instead, we draw from the resources of a rich tradition. While we look back to our sixteenth-century European roots, we also look forward to further developments in the Presbyterian tradition and to the future to which God calls us.

2 What are the origins of Presbyterian churches in the United States?

Most Presbyterian churches in the United States can trace their ancestry to the waves of European immigrants who came to this country starting in the days of the seventeenth century. A large number of Christians who believed in “Presbyterian theology” emigrated to the United States from Great Britain and the European continent.

Today there are a number of different Presbyterian denominations in the United States. They hold in common a commitment to the “presbyterian” form of church government. They differ in emphases and also, frequently, on the particular confessional standards or confessions of belief they hold as authoritative. The largest Presbyterian denomination, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), has a *Book of Confessions* composed of twelve statements of Christian belief from the early church period to the end of the twentieth century as its standards for theological beliefs. Other Presbyterian denominations often look to the Westminster Confession (1647) as their sole confessional standard.

There have been a number of Presbyterian denominations throughout the history of the United States. These have merged and split from each other, often over particular theological points and sometimes over social practices. The largest Presbyterian bodies in the United States split at the time of the American Civil War

(1861–65), primarily over slavery, and did not reunite until 1983 to form the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (PCUSA). A major issue in the last quarter century has been the ordination of women and people who are homosexual.

Earlier theological disputes still linger. There are Presbyterian bodies in the United States today who do not sing hymns but sing only psalms as found in a Psalter. Presbyterians in the United States have also split into differing bodies over issues of election and predestination, educational standards for clergy, the use of alcohol, and views about the end of the world. While these topics suggest that Presbyterians take theology seriously—which is good—they also bear witness to the fact that the larger “Presbyterian family” is divided within itself, just as Presbyterians are divided from other Christians, and the whole Christian family is also divided among many members. We all need to hear the prayer of Jesus “that they may all be one” (John 17:20–21).

3 What do we mean by a “Reformed” church or “Reformed theology”?

“Reformed” is a term that emerged during the time of the Protestant Reformation in Europe in the sixteenth century. Prior to the Reformation, the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church (after 1054) were the major Christian bodies. In 1517, a monk named Martin Luther began a movement that questioned Roman Catholic theology and belief as not being correctly based on the Bible and as incorporating practices that were not biblical. This led to the movement of church reform called the Reformation. “Protestants” were those who were witnessing to the Christian faith as they understood it from the Bible. The movement spread throughout Europe. Luther’s followers became known as Lutherans.

Other reformers agreed with Luther’s criticisms of the Roman Church but also began to differ with him on some items of biblical interpretation. This led them to become recognized as another “Protestant” movement. Theologians such as Huldrych

Zwingli, John Calvin, and Heinrich Bullinger became leaders of this movement, which became known as the Reformed tradition. The term “Reformed” came from a comment by Queen Elizabeth I in England that the followers of Zwingli and Calvin in England were more “reformed” than the Lutherans, in that they wanted a more thoroughgoing reform of worship practices based on their understanding of the Bible.

“Reformed theology” refers to the theological beliefs taught by these early Reformed theologians and the tradition of their followers that began after their deaths and that continues to the present day. Sometimes Reformed theology is called “Calvinist” theology, and in the tradition of Presbyterian churches, it is identified as “Presbyterian theology.” Reformed theology is marked by a recognition that Christian faith needs constantly to be articulated and confessed. Theologians in the Reformed tradition realize that all our theological statements are, at best, “approximations.” We can never absolutize a particular way of speaking Christian truth, because God is always leading us on and giving us new insights from the Scriptures. Yet, Reformed theology seeks to do careful theology so that Reformed churches will have ways of understanding and proclaiming the Christian faith that can speak meaningfully and compellingly to contemporary people in various cultures.

4 What is Calvinism?

Calvinism is associated with the theological understandings of John Calvin. It usually refers to the spread and development of views associated with Calvin from his sixteenth-century context in Geneva throughout the whole of Europe and beyond to other continents. It is seen as a theological “system,” where the different doctrines fit logically together to form a tight, systematic form of Christian theology.

Calvin’s followers had a formative and shaping influence as Calvinism spread and developed. Important were Calvin’s successor in Geneva, Theodore Beza (1519–1605), and others such as Peter Martyr Vermigli (1500–1562), Girolamo Zanchi

(1516–90), and Francis Turretin (1623–87). Significant developing confessional statements were the Scots Confession (1560), the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), the Second Helvetic Confession (1566), and the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647).

The most prominent theological expression of “Calvinism” took shape at the Synod of Dort (1618–19), an assembly of theologians in the Netherlands gathered to settle the predestination controversy between “Calvinists,” who followed Calvin, and “Arminians,” who followed Jacob Arminius (1560–1609), a former follower of Calvin who broke with Calvin over views of election and predestination.

The Synod of Dort established five theological points to distinguish Calvinism from Arminianism (and later, by extension, to distinguish Presbyterians from Methodists). The collective first letters of these points spell TULIP, a term appropriate for the Dutch setting.

These are: Total Depravity—that humans are affected by sin in all aspects of life; Unconditional Election—that God elects persons to salvation without foreseeing faith on their part; Limited Atonement—that Christ’s death was intended only for the elect; Irresistible Grace—that God’s grace in salvation cannot be resisted by humans; and the Perseverance of the Saints—that once Christians are saved, salvation will not be lost.

Historians and theologians disagree on the extent to which all of these together “go beyond” Calvin. Some see the developments as salutary; others do not. But the “five points of Calvinism” have given a specific theological identity. Presbyterians today, in varying degrees, both agree and disagree with the “five points.” Some would like to call themselves “Calvinian,” instead of “Calvinist,” to indicate a closer allegiance to Calvin himself.