

Membership Class

October 25, 2015

Introduction to the RPCNA and Christ RPC

RPCNA: 17 minutes (aiming for 2300 words)

Questions: 5 minutes

CRPC: 5 minutes (aiming for 700 words)

Questions: 3 minutes

Open with prayer

The RPCNA

What's In a Name?

First, let's talk about the RPCNA, the "Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America."

What part of the Christian world are we in?

This denomination (or group of churches) is, first, *part of the Western Church*. Christianity didn't start in America or Europe: it started in Israel, the Middle East, and North Africa -- in places like Egypt, Iraq, Syria, then Turkey, Greece. From there it spread outward into Iran and Central Asia to the East, and into Europe. Starting in the early years of Christianity, differences (at first of language, but later of doctrine and practice) grew up between Western (Latin-speaking) churches and Eastern (Greek or Syriac-speaking) churches. With the growth of Islam from the 600s on, many of the Eastern churches shrank or disappeared, leaving mainly Greek-speaking churches. From the Greeks missions went to places like Bulgaria and Russia. Today the traditional Eastern churches are called "Orthodox" churches: Greek Orthodox, Bulgarian Orthodox, etc. These were different from the Western church, which came to be known as Catholic, and was centered for many years in Rome.

Second, the RP denomination is a *Protestant* church. In the 1500s a number of European Christians began recognizing and speaking out against wickedness taking place in the Roman Catholic: practices like the sale of salvation, widespread hypocrisy, and the rule that regular Christians should not have the Bible in their own language. In addition, reformers like Martin Luther taught that salvation is not a matter of what we do for God, but of what God does for us: we receive justification (God's declaration that we are righteous, not guilty) through faith, not through works. Churches that follow the teachings of the reformers are called Protestant: Western, but not Roman Catholic.

There were some disagreements among the reformers as well. Most believed that the Catholic church taught, at core, the Christian faith, but that it needed cleaning up. Some taught that a radical reinvention of Christianity was needed. For instance, some said that baptizing babies was unbiblical; these came to be known as Anabaptists. One great teacher, John Calvin, focused on making Christian worship simple, biblical, and understandable, things which had been all but lost in the worship of the Catholic church at that time. He also taught very clearly that it is God who chooses us before we ever choose him: God gets the credit for our salvation. Churches that follow Calvin's teachings are known as *Reformed* church: Protestant but not Lutheran or Anabaptist.

And of course, we are a *Presbyterian* church and denomination. This is the longest word in our name, and maybe the least radical! The name Presbyterian comes from the Greek word for elders, *presbyteros*, and indicates that our churches are cared and led not by a pastor working alone, nor by the congregation making all decisions democratically, but by a team of elders working together (in our church that's Elder Robson and me: we call pastors elders as well). The Presbyterian group of churches came to America from Scotland and Northern Ireland, and up until a few generations ago our particular denomination was, effectively, a little ethnic church with few people in it who weren't of Scottish descent. (That's changed, of course, although we're still generally a white church.) We're not the biggest Presbyterian denomination in America (though not quite the smallest either). Some churches we have close relationships with include the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) and the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA).

Finally, we also need to say that we are an *Evangelical* denomination, as distinct from mainline or liberal churches (including some other Presbyterian denominations). This means that we really believe in the things we say we do: Jesus really is the Son of God; he really died and really rose; the Bible is our final authority in faith and life; men and women are created in God's image and different from one another; Christians are called to live holy lives before God.

History

So ... where did this "RP Church" come from? As I said, all Presbyterians find their roots in Scotland. In the 1500s a Scottish preacher named John Knox found himself in exile for his beliefs, and spent time in the Swiss city of Geneva, home at that time to John Calvin. Knox believed that Geneva were the closest thing he had found on earth to a godly society, so when he returned to Scotland he did his best to duplicate what he had seen.

Through fresh preaching of the gospel, Scotland experienced an amazing outpouring of God's Spirit. Many people came to believe in salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, and sought to live new lives of holiness and obedience to God. And not only did people's individual lives change; Scottish culture changed as well. Schools were founded by the Scottish churches. Within decades Scotland, even though it was a very poor country, had one of the highest literacy rates in Europe (or the world). Why? People wanted desperately to read and understand the Bible! The Scottish church experienced many changes as many of the pastors and members came to embraced Reformed principles such as the authority of Scripture and simple, biblical worship, freed of many of the elaborate ceremonies that the Roman Catholic church practiced. More than England (which became Protestant around the same time and was a much larger, richer country), Scotland truly became a Reformed country.

But there was also great resistance to the reformation, both from within Scotland and from the king of England (England and Scotland had one king, starting in 1603, even though they were two countries). King James I, his son and grandson Charles I and Charles II, wanted a less reformed, more Catholic way of worshiping -- even though Charles I and

Charles II had both agreed in writing to keep Scotland Reformed (the written documents were called the “Covenants”). The history of the mid-1600s was a mess, so I’ll keep this short. By the 1680s, only a small group remained loyal to the idea that only God, not the king of England or Scotland, can tell his church what to believe and how to worship. Those who stuck most closely to this principle came to be known as Covenanters, from the two Covenants they were fighting for. In the 1680s a final conflict took place between the king’s forces and the Covenanters. The Covenanters insisted on worshiping God as they saw to be right, sometimes leaving their cities and villages to gather in secret in the wilderness and worship. Some groups of Covenanters tried armed revolt against government troops -- and failed. Others simply kept preaching and worshiping that Christ, not Charles, was king and head of his church. Many died for this principle, being arrested, tried, and hanged, or sometimes simply gunned down by soldiers in the fields. This period was known as the “Killing Times,” and hundreds or thousands of Covenanters died in this way. The Killing Times ended in 1689 when a new king and queen took power, and declared that the Covenanters would no longer be persecuted for their beliefs.

Although they were no longer persecuted, the Covenanters, soon known as “Reformed Presbyterians,” continued to dissent (not participate) in the national Church of Scotland (which was Presbyterian in church government, though not in name). In the 1700s and 1800s they existed as a small denomination in Scotland, in great numbers in Northern Ireland (where many of them settled), and in Canada and America. With very few ministers (sometimes one or none) they worshiped in groups known as “Societies,” as they had during the Killing Times. By the mid-1700s there were Societies scattered throughout the American colonies, as far north as New Brunswick. Most were cared for by pastors such as John Cuthbertson (1718-1791), who repeatedly rode his horse from South Carolina to Vermont and back. Throughout the time of British colonization, the Reformed Presbyterians maintained separation from more mainstream Presbyterians, even though they agreed on most points of doctrine (all Presbyterians at this time believed in the Westminster Confession and Catechisms).

The American Revolution changed all of this. The new nation, the United States of America, didn't have a king who was trying to control the national church. In fact, it didn't have a national church at all. This led the Reformed Presbyterian Church to shift the focus of its practical witness, while remaining faithful to the principle that Jesus Christ is King of kings and Lord of lords. We'll talk about what that means in a moment.

Distinctive Principles, and a Little More History

Most denominations have "distinctives," teachings or practices that set them apart from other churches. Depending on your church background (if any), the RP Church may feel different in a variety of ways. In the vast majority of ways, we are in agreement with other Christians, especially Reformed, Evangelical, Protestant Christians. But we do have two things that make us different even from most of our closest brothers.

First, our practices of worship are very simple -- actually Puritan. We sing the psalms of the Bible -- the psalms which David wrote, which Jesus sang, which the whole Church of Jesus Christ (Eastern and Western, Protestant and Catholic) sang in praise to God until very modern times. We believe that though other music can be great, this is what God has clearly given us to praise him with: Psalm 22:25 says, "From you comes the theme of my praise in the great assembly." By singing the psalms -- which can sometimes make us feel strange or uncomfortable -- we allow the word of God to shape even our emotional life, and we join with those around the world who name the name of Christ in songs of praise, sorrow, repentance, and thanksgiving. It's not our intention to judge and condemn people who do other than we do; our hope is to give to God the best praise we can give him.

When we sing, we also sing without musical instruments -- which was, again, the practice of the early church in all places, as well as of Jews (like Jesus) outside of the ancient Jerusalem Temple. We praise God with the instruments he has given us, our mouths and our hearts. As a result of this, we value and encourage singing, and we work at it (in a time in America when singing and musical training have fallen by the wayside for regular people).

Our worship practices are obviously somewhat different from most churches', but they are not our most important distinctive. In fact, they are almost accidental: *most*

Presbyterian, Reformed, and even Catholic and Anglican churches would have worshiped like this a few centuries ago! Our most important doctrinal distinctive is the teaching that Jesus Christ is, because of his cross, resurrection, and ascension, king and head over all nations as well as his Church. Because of this, governments that have heard the good news that Jesus (not Caesar, not the President) is Lord should recognize him as such. This can be official and explicit, in the form of Constitutional acknowledgement (something RPs in the 19th and 20th centuries worked for, getting as far as a private meeting with President Lincoln in the 1960s). The United States Constitution was intentionally scrubbed of any reference to Christ or the Christian religion -- something that drew criticism from American Covenanters from the early days of the Republic.

But just as important as open acknowledgment that Christ (not just “We the People”) rules the nation, RPs have historically worked to see repentance for the great evils in the United States. To my knowledge, only the Quakers, the Roman Catholics, and the Reformed Presbyterians took an explicit stand against slavery in the early decades of the 1800s. In the late 1700s, the denomination decided that slaveholders could not be members of the church. This made them unwelcome in South Carolina (where many had settled after emigrating from Scotland and Ireland), fueling migration to Ohio, Indiana, and eventually further west to Kansas and Iowa. Through most of its history, RPs practiced political dissent, refusing to vote, hold office, or take oaths of loyalty to the Constitution (which meant no military service, although many young men served in the Union Army during the Civil War and later both World Wars). This has since changed, but the *Reformed Presbyterian Testimony* still instructs members to vote for “civil rulers who fear God, love truth and justice, hate evil, and are publicly committed to scriptural principles of civil government,” (*Testimony* 23.15). After the US Civil War led to the abolition of slavery, RPs focused on other issues of social reform, including the Temperance Movement, which focused on banning the manufacture or use of alcoholic beverages.

I have to tell you that in the early 1900s, enjoying a fair bit of growth and political power (especially for a very small denomination, never more than 12,000 or so members), the RP Church became so focused on social reform that it perhaps overshadowed the

preaching of the gospel. The denomination declined in the early part of the 20th century (although it carried out an impressive amount of foreign missionary work during that time), but has experienced slow-and-steady growth since the 1970s.

Ministry Today

As a Presbyterian church, the RPCNA is governed by groups of elders called “courts.” The local court of the church is called the Session. In our congregation that’s “Ruling Elder” David Robson and “Teaching Elder” Daniel Howe. The regional court is called a Presbytery. Ours is Atlantic Presbytery and includes churches in Massachusetts, Rhode Island, New York, New Jersey, and Eastern Pennsylvania. We meet at least twice a year to handle issues in various churches, to examine men who are training to be pastors, and to plan for future needs. The highest court is called the Synod, and it meets every year for about a week. Important questions about church practice or teaching have to get handled by the Synod. In this way Presbyterian churches are different from Congregationalist churches, where each congregation votes on its own beliefs, membership requirements, and practices. What happens in our church is basically the same as in dozens or hundreds of others in America and Asia.

The RPCNA shares many areas of church work, and funds and supervises them through the Synod’s Boards and Committees. Here’s a quick list:

- the Global Missions Board
- the Home Missions Board (funds and provides training for church planting)
- the Trustees of Synod (handle money for the denomination)
- the Interchurch Relations Committee (works to build relationships with other denominations)
- the Board of Education & Publication (runs the publishing house that prints our psalm books, *RP Witness* magazine, and other media)
- the Geneva College Board of Corporators (represents the needs of the RP church to Geneva College, Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania)

- the Trustees of the Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary (oversees our denomination's seminary in Pittsburgh)
- the Youth Ministries Committee (helps fund and train for stronger youth programs in the various presbyteries)

We currently have missionaries in Japan and South Sudan, and others working in places I can't talk about very publicly. There are church planting efforts around the United States and in Canada. The RPCNA is historically a Northern denomination, strongest today in New York State, Western Pennsylvania, Indiana, Kansas, and (increasingly) Colorado. But there is church planting taking place in a number of Southern states as well; old cultural barriers are perhaps breaking down. We are a small church (around 7,000 members in 100 congregations), but by God's grace we have are stable, faithful, and growing -- nothing to take for granted.

Break for Questions (5 minutes)

Christ RPC

What about this congregation? What are you getting into? Let me give you a few facts and observations about Christ Reformed Presbyterian Church.

We were "planted" by another church: First Reformed Presbyterian Church of Cambridge, Massachusetts, a congregation that a number of people came from and some (Esther Howe and Maureen Halliday) grew up in. Around 2000 David and Deryl Robson were members of First RPC of Cambridge but living in Rhode Island. They expressed an interest in seeing a Reformed Presbyterian congregation begin in their state.

In 2002 and 2003 two pastoral interns from First RPC led Bible study at the Robsons' home: first John Edgar (now a pastor in Philadelphia) and then Daniel Howe. In 2005 I (Pastor Howe) did a survey of the Providence area for the Session of First RPC, and came to the conclusion that Providence was a good place to focus the church's energy and funds. Providence has very few Evangelical churches, and Protestant Christians are a minority in

the city and in the state of Rhode Island. Since that time, several other churches have been planted by various denominations, and we praise and glorify God for them.

On the first day of 2006, we held our first worship service. By that time several people in addition to the Robsons were committed to starting a church (including the Trexlers, the Hallidays, Topper, and the Howes). We had worship services every two weeks until July of that year, when we held them weekly. Pastor Adjemian and Elder Wright of First RPC, Daniel Howe, and a rotation of other men provided preaching. In May 2007 I (Pastor Howe) received a “pastoral call” from First RPC to serve as an associate pastor to plant a church in Providence, and in July 2007 I was ordained and installed. For the next few times we were cared for by a “temporary governing body” of elders from other churches in our presbytery and by me (Pastor Howe). The presbytery also provided that Matt Van Vlack served as a deacon during that time. In 2009 we were formally “organized,” meaning that we became a separate church from First RPC, and David Robson became our first ruling elder.

Christ RPC is somewhat unique among churches in this area (at least churches that I know) and in the RPCNA in that we are a body containing people from two very different sets of cultures: North Americans and Africans. I (Pastor Howe) observe that this is both a great challenge, and a beautiful picture of the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is a challenge because the Americans in the church are slowly learning to understand and relate to people coming from a very different culture, and because the Africans have to exercise tremendous patience with the Americans! It is also a challenge for the children of immigrant families, who are living effectively in two cultures -- that of their parents and that of everyday life in America. But it is also a wonderful picture of the gospel. In the book of Revelation, the holy people of God praise Jesus Christ: “you were slain, and with your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth.” As we recognize that our true identity, our true nation, is the kingdom of God, and as we learn to work through our differences to love one another, we show each other and the world the character, the love, and the power of the God we serve.

Some of you may be young believers seeking baptism, or who have been baptized and are ready to publicly announce your faith in Christ. Others may be mature believers who have been members in other churches and are thinking about committing to this one. We are excited that every one of you in this class is exploring membership, and we hope that these weeks will be a great place for you to come to see the commitments and the blessings of membership in God's church.

Questions