What does it mean that we are Presbyterians? There really isn't a short answer to that question. However, there is a fun way to start answering it, using the seal of the Presbyterian Church (USA). The seal contains the components of our faith in a way that is easy to remember and easy to explain.

The Seal of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

The seal of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is a symbolic statement of the church's heritage, identity, and mission in contemporary form. Its power depends on both its simplicity and complexity, as well as its traditional and enduring qualities.

The Seal: A Closer Look

The dominant structural and theological element in the design is **the cross** — the universal and most ecumenical symbol of the Christian church. The cross represents the incarnate love of God in Jesus Christ and his passion and resurrection. Because of its association with Presbyterian history, the Celtic cross was chosen as a model for this contemporary rendering of the ancient symbol.

The contour of a book begins to emerge in the horizontal section and the two center lines of the cross became the representation of an **open book**. This integration of the horizontal dimensions of the cross with the book highlights the emphasis that the Reformed tradition has placed on the role of Scripture as a means of knowing God's word. Reading the Bible is a major spiritual discipline.

The slightly-flared shape of the Celtic cross transforms the uppermost section into the shape of a **descending dove**. As a symbol of the Holy Spirit, the dove is intimately tied to the representation of the Bible, affirming the role of the Spirit in both inspiring and interpreting Scripture in the life of the church. The dove also symbolizes Christ's baptism by John and the peace and wholeness which his death and resurrection bring to a broken world.

Beneath the image of the book is the suggestion of a **lectern or pulpit**, which captures the important role of preaching in Presbyterian worship. One of the marks of the true church is the preaching of God's word to God's people.

Within the shape of the descending dove is the form of a **fish.** The fish is an early-Christian sign for Christ, recalling his ministry to those who hunger and his call to his first disciples to come and fish for people.

Within the shape of the pulpit, the baptismal **font** also appears to be a communion **chalice** (cup). This element of the design emphasizes the two sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper which, along with the hearing of the Word, are at the heart of worship and of our life together as a community of faith.

On either side of the cross are **flames** which convey a double meaning: a symbol of revelation in the Old Testament when God spoke to Moses from the burning bush and a suggestion of the beginning of the Christian church when Christ manifested himself to his apostles at Pentecost and charged them to be messengers of the good news of God's love.

The **triangle** reminds us of the Trinity, the triune God and also suggests the nature of Presbyterian government. Our governance emphasizes balance and order, dividing authority between teaching and ruling elders and between different governing bodies. This understanding of the church was based in part on an important idea in Reformed theology, the covenant, which God establishes with people to affirm God's enduring love and to call us to faith and obedience to Jesus Christ.

In 1 Corinthians, Paul described the church as a body with many members, illustrating the pluralism of the church and the many gifts which God gives to its members. So also the seal's individual parts, when taken together, form an encompassing visual and symbolic unity, while not exhausting the richness of possible interpretations.

Informed by scripture and our confessions, Presbyterians also believe the following:

The Bible

The Bible is a collection of 66 individual books that together tell the story of a group of people bound by a common faith in God. It is divided into two main sections: the Old Testament containing 39 books originally written primarily in Hebrew and the New Testament containing 27 books originally written primarily in Greek. For Presbyterians and others of the Reformed tradition, the Bible is the means by which Christian believers come to understand how God has been present with humanity since the beginning of time and is present in our world today. By studying the scriptures, we can begin to know of God's faithfulness, constant love, and eternal goodness.

The church confesses the Scriptures to be the Word of God written, witnessing to God's self-revelation. Where that Word is read and proclaimed, Jesus Christ the Living Word is present by the inward witness of the Holy Spirit. For this reason, the reading, hearing, preaching, and confessing of the Word are central to Christian worship.

The Church

The Church is the Body of Christ in and for the world. "Our Reformed view of the church is grounded in the triune God. The church is not based on being a voluntary association of those who decide it may be a good idea to get together to form an organization. Rather, we believe the church and our part in it is through the work of the eternal God who elects and calls and brings together the communion of saints."

Church is where our Christian faith and life are expressed. Yet the Reformed and Presbyterian traditions have a much broader view of a universal church that includes not only the saints presently living on earth, but all the people whom God has blessed throughout history. We are a priesthood of believers.

Sacraments

Sacraments are signs of the real presence and power of Christ in the Church, symbols of God's action. Through the Sacraments, God seals believers in redemption, renews their identity as the people of God, and marks them for service. Denominations often differ over what they recognize as sacraments. Some recognize as many as seven sacraments; others have no sacraments in the life of the church. The Presbyterian Church (USA) has two sacraments, Baptism and the Lord's Supper. "The Reformed tradition understands Baptism and the Lord's Supper to be Sacraments, instituted by God and commended by Christ.

Baptism

Christian baptism is the sign and seal of our adoption into God's family. In baptism, we die to our old selves and are raised to new life in Christ. We are baptized only once in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Bible declares that God claimed humanity as God's own "before the foundation of the world." (Ephesians 1:4)

Both believers and their children are included in God's covenant love. Children of believers are to be baptized without undue delay, but without undue haste. Baptism, whether administered to those who profess their faith or to those presented for baptism as children, is one and the same Sacrament. The baptism of children witnesses to the truth that God's love claims people before they are able to respond in faith. For Presbyterians, Baptism, therefore, usually occurs during infancy, though a person may be baptized at any age. Parents bring their baby to church, where they publicly declare their desire that he or she be baptized. When an infant or child is baptized the church commits itself to nurture the child in faith. When adults are baptized, they make a public profession of faith.

The Lord's Supper

Having been welcomed into God's family through baptism, we are welcomed at the family table again and again so we may be nourished in our life of faith. In the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, we are united with Christ and with our brothers and sisters in Christ. We believe Christ is really present in the Sacrament through the Holy Spirit, though the elements of bread and wine/juice remain unchanged.

Sources: www.pcusa.org, The Book of Confessions & The Book of Order of the PC(USA), and *Theology for Presbyterians by Donald K. McKim*

If you would like to learn more about Presbyterian beliefs. Please follow this link and click on the various tabs you will find there: https://www.presbyterianmission.org/what-we-believe/