

## Introduction to *Theology for Presbyterians*

Presbyterian Christians are part of the Reformed theological tradition. This tradition has its roots in the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation. A group of Christian leaders sought the reform of the Roman Catholic Church, which, with the Eastern Orthodox Church, was one of the two main branches of Christianity at that time.

In 1517, Martin Luther (1483–1546) started the reform movement of the church with his “Ninety-five Theses” which outlined his critiques of the Roman Church. Luther’s writings grew, and he attracted many followers. Later these followers were called “Lutherans.”

Others who sought reform of the Roman Church followed Luther on some things, but disagreed with him on other theological points. Especially prominent leaders of this group included Huldrych Zwingli (1484–1531), Martin Bucer (1491–1551), and John Calvin (1509–1564). Followers of these theologians became known as “Reformed” Christians. They sought reform of the church based on the Scripture as the Word of God. Of these, Calvin took on a special place of prominence due to his keen insights and extensive ministries of writing, preaching, and teaching.

Reformed churches sprang up over Europe and spread to the New World. Calvin had advocated a “presbyterian” form of church government. He believed the church should be governed by “elders” (Greek *presbyteros*) who made decisions in collective bodies, centered in “presbyteries.” Christians who adopted this direction, along with Reformed theology, are called Presbyterians.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is the largest Presbyterian Church body in the United States. The following study introduces us to main Presbyterian beliefs about major Christian doctrines and opens the door to further study and reflection that can enhance our faith by providing a wider understanding of our rich theological heritage as Reformed Christians.

This study is offered in the hope that it will spark interest and deepen Christian faith as we consider the distinctive emphases of the Reformed tradition, which can enrich our lives as Presbyterian Christians.