

## **SEALED IN CHRIST**

A Prayerful Study of the Seal of the Presbyterian Church  
(U.S.A.)

Heartland Presbyterian Center

The seal of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is a mini-confession — a symbolic and graphic statement of central theological affirmations of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Each component says something about the Gospel and our experience of it. As you study the seal we trust that you will have a new openness to God's love in every aspect of your life, and that you will be drawn to care about that for which Christ cares.

“It is God who establishes us with you in Christ and has anointed us; by putting His seal on us and giving us His Spirit in our hearts as a first installment.” 2 Corinthians 1:21

## Station 1

### **The Symbol**

The Cross, the universal symbol of Christian faith.

### **Suggested Scripture**

John 3:16

### **Reflecting**

The cross captures the heart of the Christian gospel, the message that in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ we see God's love and we are offered forgiveness from our sins.

More than 400 different versions of the cross have emerged in the history of Christianity. At first the early Protestant Reformers rejected the use of the cross as a symbol of Christianity because they attempted to rid the church of devotion to images. They frowned upon the popular use of crucifixes as a devotional aid in the Roman Catholic tradition; crosses were banned from churches and denounced for personal use.

The cross in the Presbyterian seal is modeled after the Celtic cross that eventually became widely used in the Presbyterian tradition. Sometimes called the Ionic or Irish cross, it is one of the most ancient forms of the cross and was developed by ancient Celtic people in Ireland and Great Britain.

If one removes the dove from the Presbyterian seal, the Tau cross appears. This is the oldest known form of the cross and the one most closely associated with the crucifixion. The name is taken from the Greek word for the letter T.

Martin Luther once declared that all theology begins at the foot of the cross. We cannot remove the cross from Christianity without emptying faith of its power and its truth. In the way of the cross is our forgiveness, our life, and our hope: "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." (Galatians 2:19-20)

## Station 2

### **The Symbol**

The cup and baptismal font.

### **Suggested Scripture**

Free food: Isaiah 55:1-5

Jesus the bread: John 6:32-40

### **Reflecting**

One of the most creative features of the Presbyterian seal is the cup. It can be seen by looking at the spine of the book and mentally removing the covers at each side so that the half circle remains. The cup is supported by the central horizontal line of the cross and by the base of the cross. The cup thus becomes both a chalice and a baptismal font, symbols of the two sacraments — baptism and the Lord's Supper.

Integrated into the design of the book, the location of the cup symbolizes the Reformed emphasis on the relationship between Word and sacrament. Located beneath the dove, it symbolizes the importance of the Holy Spirit in making baptism and the Lord's Supper the means of grace for the individual. Through the Word and sacraments, we are sealed in Christ.

## Station 3

### **The Symbol**

The descending dove, the sign of the gift and presence of the Holy Spirit.

### **Suggested Scripture**

Promise of the Spirit: John 16:4(b)-15

### **Reflecting**

The figure of the dove, one of the oldest symbols in the history of Christianity, forms the top of the cross. To a world threatened by nuclear destruction, to a world wracked by violence, to a world devastated by famine and disease, the dove has become a symbol of Christian hope for reconciliation and peace. In the story of Noah and the flood and in the baptism of Jesus, the dove brought a message, and that good news is what we as disciples are commissioned to proclaim to the world. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, descending on the church and strengthening and inspiring the disciples of Christ, Jesus' words become both a source of comfort and a summons to faithful witness: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives." (John 14:27)

## Station 4

### **The Symbol**

The fish was one of the earliest signs for the Christian.

### **Suggested Scripture**

Calling as Disciples: Luke 5:1-11

Loaves and Fishes: John 6:1-15

### **Reflecting**

One of the little-noticed symbols in the Presbyterian seal is the image of the fish. It can be seen by mentally removing the wings of the dove. The asymmetrical body of the dove then becomes a fish. The hidden quality of the fish is appropriate, for the fish was first used by early Christians as a secret sign that both disguised and revealed their identities as followers of Christ. Later, probably by coincidence, the Greek word for fish (*ichthys*) was seen as an acronym for "Jesus, Son of God, Savior." The first letter of each of the Greek words — *Iesous Christos, Theou Huios, Soter* — spelled *ichthys*, or fish.

## Station 5

### **The Symbol**

The open Bible declares God's word to us.

### **Suggested Scripture**

In praise of God's word: Psalm 119:1-11

The Word in testing: Luke 4: 1-13

### **Reflecting**

Protestants are people of the book – the Bible. “Sola Scriptura” — Latin for “scripture alone” — was one of the great rallying cries of all branches of the Protestant Reformation. The churches of the Calvinist or Reformed family of Protestantism have likewise made scripture the supreme authority for Christian faith and life. In the words of the Westminster Larger Catechism (*Book of Confessions*, 7.113), the Bible is “the only rule of faith and obedience.”

In the seal of the former Presbyterian Church in the U.S., the Bible appears as an open-faced book with “The Word of God” printed on one page and a serpent intertwined around a cross on the other. Similarly, the seal of the former United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. contains a book with an alpha and an omega on the open page. Through the book is an arrow with an alpha tip and an omega end, symbolizing the power of the Word of God to penetrate the sinful heart.

The placement of the dove directly above the open Bible in our current seal was intended to signify the important role of the Holy Spirit in both inspiring scripture and interpreting the works of scripture as God's word to us. One of the central themes of the New Testament is the affirmation that Jesus is the Word of God incarnate. Christ fulfills scripture. John's Gospel opens with the declaration: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . . and the Word became flesh and lived among us . . . full of grace and truth”. (1:1,14)

“All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.” (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

## Station 6

### **The Symbol**

The pulpit stands for declaring and sharing the good news of the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

### **Suggested Scripture**

Great Commission: Matthew 28:16-20

"*To the ends . . .*": Acts 1:16-11

### **Reflecting**

The Bible of the Presbyterian seal lies on a pulpit or lectern, symbolizing the importance of preaching in the Presbyterian tradition. Today it may be hard to appreciate why the sermon became so important and popular since preaching is important in all branches of Christianity. However, when the Reformation began, the central act of Christian worship was the celebration of the Mass, a sacramental act in which the people observed the priest, partook of only the bread, and listened to Latin words that few understood. The reformers restored preaching to worship — a sermon based on scripture.

The open book on the pulpit beneath a descending dove is a symbol of the Presbyterian tradition's dual emphases on preaching and teaching, guided and informed by the Holy Spirit.

## Station 7

### **The Symbol**

The fire.

### **Suggested Scripture**

Exodus 3:1-15

The Holy Spirit Given: Acts 2:1-21

Life in the Spirit: Romans 8:1-17

### **Reflecting**

The four flames at the base of the Presbyterian seal draw on many biblical images of fire and light: the burning bush in the Old Testament and the tongues of fire that descended at Pentecost. The fire in the burning bush is obviously a symbol for God. He is awesome, not to be approached casually. Fire also becomes a symbol of the Holy Spirit in the account of Pentecost in Acts 2:3-4: "Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability." Pentecost marks the birthday of the church through a baptism of fire, and the Holy Spirit gave the apostles the power to proclaim the gospel to people of different lands. The Holy Spirit is the soil in which the seed of faith grows and in which the community of faith is nurtured. The church has consistently affirmed that without the work of the Holy Spirit, there can be no faith.

Fire also may become a symbol for light and truth, which are prevalent images in the New Testament. The image of Jesus as the light of the world has been one of the most powerful metaphors for describing salvation by Christ, and it has its parallels in Paul's description of the sight brought by faith.

## Station 8

There are other symbols within our seal that you may wish to reflect upon:

The **implied triangle** is formed by the base of the cross and the bottom sides of the flames. It has always been used in Christian art to symbolize the Trinity. The Trinity is ultimately a mystery, but the concept is crucial in describing the nature of God as one God — “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” known to us through God’s creating, redeeming, and sustaining power over all of life. This mystery of three “persons,” or three ways of knowing God, unified in one reality, is at the heart of the idea of the Trinity.

**Blue** is the color of the sky, symbolizing heaven and divine love, and truth. **Red** is the color of blood, and thus the symbol for Christ, his suffering, and the call to be Christ’s disciple. Red is also the color of fire and is associated with Pentecost and God’s revelation in the burning bush. **White** symbolizes innocence, purity and holiness.

The **cross** itself has three parts — and the formation of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) was actually the union of three churches in the mid to late twentieth century: The Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (PCUSA) and the United Presbyterian Church of North America (UPCNA) merged in 1958 to form the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America. That United Presbyterian Church and the Presbyterian Church in the U.S. (PCUS) merged in 1983 to form our present denomination.

The Crucified Christ, with arms outstretched and hanging head, is not in the dark portion of the cross, but appears within the cross.

Our resources include the book, “Sealed in Christ,” The Symbolism of the Seal of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), by John Mulder and published by Geneva Press, as well as the Prayer Trail Booklet from Heartland Presbyterian Camp.

Stepping Stones handmade by the Women of the Presbyterian Church of Stanley, Kansas — January 2003.