

How to Choose Educational Resources That Reflect Presbyterian/Reformed Theology

For many people, it is confusing to choose educational resources. There is a plethora of choices from our denominational book store (The Book Room), local Christian book stores and the internet.

Why is choosing reformed/Presbyterian resources important?

Many people say, "Why can't I just go downtown and buy some 'Christian' resources?" To use a simple illustration, it is like being sent to the store to buy ice cream. But, what kind of ice cream? Chocolate? Vanilla? Butterscotch? Strawberry? And the choices get more complicated—sugar free? lactose free?

There are several main "flavours" of the Christian church and all produce resources in that particular "flavour":

- ◆ Anabaptist/Mennonite
- ◆ Anglican
- ◆ Dispensationalist
- ◆ Evangelical
- ◆ Lutheran
- ◆ Orthodox
- ◆ Reformed/Presbyterian
- ◆ Roman Catholic

Which one is the "right" branch of Christianity? No single "flavour" is right or wrong. Christians may feel more comfortable in their tradition and therefore begin to believe that their tradition is "right." But, the reality is, the various traditions evolved out of a wide variety of historical circumstances and offer a broad spectrum of different flavours of Christianity.

If you are reformed/Presbyterian, is it okay to use material from another tradition? It is possible to do this, but it seems counter productive to use Roman Catholic material in a Presbyterian church. For one thing, our Catholic friends celebrate seven sacraments while Presbyterians celebrate two. And it seems equally counter productive to use Orthodox materials which are full of liturgy and ritual unrecognizable to Presbyterians.

Check List for Choosing Materials of the Reformed/Presbyterian Tradition

(For addition information, please check all footnotes)

Question	Response*
Source of curriculum	
1. What publisher produces this resource? Is it allied in some way to the reformed/Presbyterian tradition?	
Pedagogy	
2. Is the material age appropriate?	
3. Are the stories appropriate for the age?	
4. Does the material offer a broad range of ways to learn?	
5. Does the material use engaging teaching methods?	
6. Is the material easy to use?	
Language	
7. Is the language convenantal?	
8. Is there "election" rather than personal choice language?	
9. Is there a broad range of biblical ways to describe God?	
10. Is the language inclusive, diverse and respectful of others?	
Attractiveness/Design	
11. Is the design appealing?	
12. Does the resource use a variety of images from other cultures and ethnic groups?	
Use of scripture	
13. Is the scripture used in a way that is in keeping with how Presbyterians use scripture?	
Theology	
14. Does the material lift up some of the main themes in reformed/Presbyterian theology—the sovereign God, living in community, grace, responding in gratitude?	
15. Does the resource's theological purpose statement fit with The Presbyterian Church in Canada?	
16. Are the creeds used those that are commonly used in The Presbyterian Church in Canada?	
17. Is it Christ-centred?	
Outreach	
18. Is evangelism and faith tied to action?	
Sacraments	
19. Are people of all ages included in baptism?	
20. Are people of all ages included in communion? Is communion an "open table"?	
Fit with your congregation	
21. Does the curriculum fit with the climate of your congregation? The worship style?	
Is there contentment in the decision?	
22. When all is said and done, does the curriculum or resource "feel" right?	

Further Explanation

* It is possible to simply use a “yes” or “no” in answering these questions. However, it may be that you are willing to overlook some aspects of a curriculum in order to have other features. In that case, you might use a system of categorizing each item as 3 (very acceptable), 2 (somewhat acceptable) or 1 (not very acceptable).

1. The following presses are either reformed/Presbyterian or are closely related to reformed theology: John Knox/Westminster Press, Geneva Press, Cokesbury, Abingdon, The United Church Press, Augsburg Fortress, Wood Lake Books, CRC Publications.
2. It is wise to check with a teacher in the public school system as to age appropriateness of material. For instance, if a resource asks 6 year old children to use their Bible to find and read a Bible verse, this is too difficult a task for that age and will make the child frustrated.
3. A list of appropriate stories for each age level can be obtained from the Education in the Faith office at 50 Wynford Drive (800-619-7301). It is unwise, for instance, to tell preschoolers the story of Abraham sacrificing Isaac. Even the well known and popular story of Noah's Ark raises troublesome questions for young children—why did God let all the other people and animals drown?
4. Are there indications that the writers have used multiple intelligences? Are there examples of verbal/linguistic activities, logical/mathematical activities, visual/spatial activities, body/kinesthetic activities, musical/rhythmic activities/ interpersonal and intrapersonal activities?
5. It is still, for instance, possible to find material that gives the teacher both the question to ask *and* the “correct” answer to expect. Good material—like the Bible—should cause us to think. Walter Brueggeman, a contemporary theologian, says that the Bible is meant to raise questions rather than give answers. It is to force us into dialogue about mysteries rather than close discussions with certitudes.
6. This factor often gets too much weight when selecting resources as people invariably say, “But people are so busy now!” While ease of use is a factor, it should not be rated as “the” important element in a curriculum.
7. Presbyterian/reformed theology tends to say things like this: “God has come to us. The Lord spoke to the people of Israel and entered into covenant with them. From Israel came Jesus Christ, the Son of God, bringing salvation through a new covenant entered by faith. The Lord continues to come to us by the Holy Spirit, God present in the world, and Guide to the church, the new Israel. (*Living Faith*, 1.2). Salvation

language that is outside our reformed tradition tends to ask, "Have you met Jesus as your personal Saviour?" or "Have you been to mass this week?" If Presbyterians/reformed people are asked, "When were you saved?" they may properly answer, "Two thousand years ago."

8. Presbyterians/reformed people have a strong sense of election—but it is election for service, not just salvation. The word "covenant"—a covenant made between God and people—is often seen in Presbyterian/reformed materials. For Presbyterians/reformed people salvation is more a community celebration than an individual choice.
9. Reformed/Presbyterians use a wide variety of images to describe the person of God. "Father" is one of them, but the Bible contains literally hundreds of descriptions for God. Materials that use only male pronouns and titles to describe God tend to be outside the Presbyterian/reformed tradition. The resource *45 Ways to Include Children in Worship*, Dorothy Henderson, The Presbyterian Church in Canada, 1993, provides a long list of biblical names for God.
10. It is still possible to pick up resources that declare that "Jews killed Jesus," that suggest that certain people are demonic or associate "black" with evil and darkness.
11. Does the resource use colour, white space, photos and design elements to make you want to pick up and use the resource?
12. Does the resource reflect that a user might be a First Nations Canadian? Or a Chinese-Canadian? Or a black Canadian?
13. Presbyterians understand interpretation of Scripture as a dynamic interplay of several things. The Church Doctrine Committee (*Acts and Proceedings*, 1994, p. 253) says that the hermeneutical (interpretation) task is that of joining "the horizon of the text" with the "horizon of the interpreter."

This involves 4 major components which are constantly interrelated.

1. *We are prompted by the Spirit* working on the horizons of our experience **to listen afresh for God's Word** witnessed to in Scripture.
2. *We seek to understand the Bible in its original historical setting*, recognizing the variety of material it contains. For this a wise use of historical-critical methods is essential.
3. *We look at the biblical material as a canonical whole*. The dangers of quoting isolated proof-texts are well known. ...we look for the underlying unity and diversity, continuity and discontinuity in Scripture, paying particular attention to the relationship between the Old and New Testaments....

4. ***We bring the biblical materials to bear on our contemporary situation.*** The gift of discernment is especially need here. What biblical precepts still apply in our day? What specific prescriptions were directed only to the original historical situation, and what principles lie behind such rulings?

Presbyterians tend not to use words like “infallible” and “inerrant” to describe Scripture. However, John Calvin believed the Bible will infallibly lead us to Christ and not fail to do what it is supposed to do (Isa.55:11). The Bible contains everything necessary for salvation, but not everything there is to know about God. How God is revealed in Scripture is as mysterious as how God was revealed in flesh.

As we teach, we can confidently treat the Bible seriously and with an open mind. We can be unafraid of the question it raises, and encourage students to enter it courageously. If people come across stories which are hard to believe (was there really a fish that swallowed a man whole?) ask, “What great truth is there in this story? Why do you think God wanted this story included in the Bible? What does it teach us?”

14. Here are some of the main themes in Presbyterian/Reformed theology:

- God is **sovereign**. God always acts first. God is benevolently in charge. God has created all that is. The whole universe testifies to the majesty and power of its Maker (*Living Faith 1.1*).
- God calls us into **community**. The church is the body of Christ. The community gives us power and nurture. The church is Christ together with his people called both to worship and to serve him in all of life. (*Living Faith 7.1.1*)
- We live by **grace**. The gift of forgiveness is already given. It is never earned. Through the death and resurrection of Christ our sins are forgiven. Salvation means life, forgiveness, healing, wholeness. (*Living Faith 2.5.7*)
- We live in **gratitude**. Gratitude is the response we offer in response to the unearned gift of God’s grace. We do not live with gratitude in our hearts because we want to get something good. We live with gratitude because we know we already have something good.

15. It is difficult, at times, to find the theological purpose statement of some resources. However, most resources are listed on a website. You can tell a lot about the match-ability of a resource by reading their theological purpose.

16. Through the ages various Christian traditions have used specific creeds as their "standard." In one particular resource recently reviewed by our denomination there was extensive reference in the Junior Youth material to a particular catechism which is not widely known in our denomination. For this reason, the Education in the Faith Advisory Committee decided not to recommend this material for use in our denomination.
17. A Christ-centred church uses Jesus Christ as the foundation of all that is life-giving and liberating.
18. Our *Living Faith* declares that we are called to deal fairly with each other, protect the rights of others, care for the poor of the world and oppose prejudice. If resources call us to respond to God with verbal evangelism without feeding the hungry, those resources are nearly always outside our Presbyterian/reformed tradition.
19. Presbyterians/reformed people believe that baptism is a joining with God's people. Even a tiny infant may become a member of a Presbyterian/reformed church through baptism. Others outside our tradition might declare that infants should be baptized very soon after they are born in order to be close to God in life or death. Others outside our tradition allow only believer's baptism when older people make a personal profession of Christ. In our tradition, people of all ages are baptized.
20. Recently, at a Canadian Council of Churches conference, communion was announced. There were three choices—Catholic, Orthodox and "open." Presbyterians belong to the cluster of Christians who welcome other Christians openly to the table. Many clergy offer a communion invitation like this—"Come to the table because you love the Lord a little and would like to love more." It is left up to each individual church session to decide whether children are invited to that particular table, but it is safe to say that, as a denomination, children are members of the church from the time of their baptism and as baptized members are welcome also at communion. Some congregations continue to worry that children will not "understand" communion. While it is not necessary or helpful to understand God's grace in this way, we have prepared materials that help children and adults work together to grasp the importance of the sacraments. These are available from church offices, 50 Wynford Drive, Toronto (800-619-7301).
21. In the resource *A Climate for Learning: Educational Planning for Your Congregation*, The Presbyterian Church in Canada, 1995 these elements are listed as constituting a positive climate for learning: climate of warmth, sense of family, uplifting worship, orientation to service, intellectual stimulation.

22. Make the last step of the process a "resting" place. Is there contentment in the decision? Is there consolation rather than desolation? If a group is split in the use of the curriculum or resource, there is likely not much consolation in choosing it.