

Are You Saved, or Are You Presbyterian?

WHEN WERE YOU SAVED?

"I was saved around two thousand years ago." When Presbyterians respond this way to a question we hear often in the Bible Belt—"When were you saved?"—it reflects our conviction that salvation is centered in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus two millennia ago. When a neo-evangelical asks when you were saved, however, they are focused not on what Jesus did long ago but on your present religious experience—the year, the day, the moment when you "accept Jesus" into your life. Often for the neo-evangelical, you are not actually saved unless you are able to cite the particular day and time when this acceptance occurred. This is why the question is so important to them and their system of belief. If you don't know, then "where will you go?"

**Warning:
Grace Abounds**

Since, for the neo-evangelical Christian in the Bible Belt, the significant event in a Christian's salvation is this moment of acceptance or conversion, opportunities to come forward in church and to commit one's life to Jesus are central to worship. Mission is focused on bringing people to Christ through preaching, convicting people of their sin, and helping them accept Christ into their hearts. Life in the church is shaped by this important task of helping more and more people find their salvation.

There is a sense of urgency for the neo-evangelicals as they seek to bring more and more people to Christ. If they don't ask you, if they don't try to bring you to Jesus, then your soul is at stake. When many youth share a sense of frustration about friends who push them on this question, it should be understood that, for the neo-evangelical, another's salvation is in limbo unless one can give a particular answer. Without that verbal acceptance, without that sense of the moment when you accepted Jesus Christ, without that conversion, you will "go to hell." With this theology, all things take a back seat to this task: "saving souls" for Jesus. "When were you saved?" becomes the most important question in the world.

A FEARFUL FUNERAL

A number of years ago, a teenager was killed in a car accident. The funeral was filled with high school friends and families as they mourned the death of a friend. The preacher emphasized to the congregation that it was good that the young man had accepted Christ into his life so that he was assured he would get into heaven. The preacher then proceeded to ask the congregation if each one had accepted Jesus Christ into her or his heart, because "you never know if your life could end in one split second just as suddenly as this young man's." Fear seemed to be reflected in the eyes of a number of the young people. Do you wonder how, in the midst of such grief and tragedy, the preacher could use this funeral as a way to bring people to Jesus even through fear? Yet for that preacher, this especially is a time to "get people saved," because the possibility of losing a soul could have eternal ramifications. In his mind, converting people to Christ is most important. Everything else takes a back seat.

DO PRESBYTERIANS BELIEVE IN CONVERSION?

"I was saved two thousand years ago." What do we mean by this statement? First of all, we are affirming that our salvation is not dependent on one particular moment when we accepted Christ or one particular moment when we were converted. In fact, salvation is not something *we* do at all. It is *God* who acts; it is *God* who saves through Jesus Christ. We affirm, rather,

that no moment of acceptance saves us, but God in Christ who acted yesterday, acts today, and will act tomorrow saves us. One key element of the Presbyterian tradition is a focus on God's saving action rather than human action. Our emphasis will always be on God who saves and redeems rather than our own words or actions in saving ourselves.

An interesting story in the Gospels (John 3:1-21) highlights this difference. In fact, this passage is often cited by neo-evangelicals when they talk about "being born again." The story is about Nicodemus, a Pharisee and leader of the Jews, who comes to Jesus under the cover of night. "Rabbi," he says, "we know you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God."

Jesus responds with some very strange words. (Jesus has a habit of saying strange things.) "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." This phrase highlights the difficulty literalists have in trying to assert that we should take the Bible word for word. The Greek phrase popularly translated as "born again" or "born anew" is more literally translated "born from above." The "born again Christians" could be more truly be described as Christians "born from above."

Jesus' wording points to the truth that our ability to encounter the kingdom of God comes not from our human striving but from a birth granted by God from above.¹ To take this passage literally is to miss the whole point. To be "born from above"—poetically speaking—is to be born by God, shaped by God, converted by God. Problems arise when neo-evangelicals interpret this birth as a once-in-a-lifetime experience. That interpretation misunderstands Jesus' emphasis on God's actions and the continual process of being born from above. (For more on why literalism is unbiblical, see the next chapter.)

But Nicodemus asks Jesus, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can anyone enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" Nicodemus would have made a good literalist! Then Jesus responds with even stranger words. (There he goes again!) "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." The birth into the kingdom is one of water (more on baptism later) and of the Spirit. And this Spirit (the Greek word for "wind" can also be translated as "Spirit") blows where it will. It comes and goes by God's hand and not by our human will. Jesus is saying that the birth from above is God's seemingly random action like the wind that blows where it chooses. To be born from above is to trust in God's

Spirit to save us as God is spiritually present in our physical lives. We do not, then, trust in our own abilities to save ourselves.

A little further in the John 3 discussion, Jesus speaks the words we have seen cited on more posters at football games than beer ads: "For *God* so loved the world that *God* gave the only Son so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" (John 3:16, alt.; emphasis added). Notice that Jesus states it is God who loves the world; it is God who gave the Son. It is first and foremost God's actions that save and not our own. Jesus does point to the truth that believing is integral to this eternal life, but believing is not simply a kind of intellectual assent, a simple embrace of certain abstract truths. Again the Greek word is much richer in meaning than this. Believing is a deeper experience than simply answering an altar call, walking an aisle, and saying certain words. The word for believing implies trust, a living relationship of faith that is both intellectual and emotional. Trust is the ability to put one's faith not in ourselves but in another. "Trust in me," Jesus is saying, "and you will experience God's love and nearness."

The point is this: Presbyterians understand conversion to be a lifelong process. Trust isn't shared one time only, but continuously. Being "born again" is not a single event we necessarily point to and say, "That is when I was saved." There may be moments of God's presence that are particularly powerful in our lifelong conversion, but salvation is not dependent on them. To be "born from above" is a process whereby God shapes us more and more in the image of Christ. God is continually at work reforming us in God's image. Conversion is less about a particular time and place and more about lives lived in trust to a God who chooses us and who continuously loves us to wholeness. (The Greek word for "salvation" carries the meaning of "being made whole or complete.")

For many neo-evangelicals in the Bible Belt, salvation is dependent on that moment when you convert. For the Presbyterian, salvation is dependent on God who acted throughout Israel's history and in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This same God acts in our lives today and everyday. Salvation is a gift (grace!) given to us to be opened and celebrated not once but continuously as our lives are opened by God's gracious Spirit. Our task is to trust (believe) in that gift.

WHY DO WE BAPTIZE BABIES (AND GOD'S CHILDREN OF ALL AGES)?

As we have seen, Presbyterians emphasize God's action over human action in salvation. This is why we baptize babies. Because we believe salvation is

not initiated by our actions but, in fact, is God's gift to all, then baptizing a child affirms that God's grace comes to us long before we ever realize it. God is shaping our souls and lives, and sometimes we are not even aware of how God is involved in forming us into the people we are becoming. So, when we baptize a baby or person of any age, we believe (trust) that this child belongs to God and is being formed by God even without any visible signs of this forming.² The community of faith promises that this child will be raised in the faith and will experience the grace of God in their midst. When a child is baptized, the church promises to join with the parents in taking responsibility for the child's spiritual development. The baptism becomes a starting point rather than an end in itself—the beginning of a lifelong conversion to God's grace. The power of baptism is not tied to the moment when it is administered but only dramatizes the beginning of the journey bringing us deeper and deeper into Christ.

By contrast, for the neo-evangelical the emphasis is on the believer's actions, the believer's words and commitment, the believer's ability to embrace the faith. For Presbyterians, baptism is something "done for us" by God through the community of faith. It is about how God embraces us. This is why baptism is received only once in the Presbyterian Church. Our Directory of Worship states, "God's faithfulness needs no renewal."³ We may need renewal and recommitment at times in our life. *We* may need to embrace God's love in a renewed way, but *God's* faithfulness to us does not need renewal. There is no need for repeated baptisms because God has claimed us once and for all as God's own in our baptism. What God has begun in our baptism, God faithfully continues throughout our lives. This is the truth we embrace as Presbyterians.

GRACE, NOT WORKS!

Consider this first-person testimony of grace:

I was like any normal twelve-year-old boy, which means I found plenty of opportunities to get into trouble. On one occasion, my best friend had come over to the house to spend the night, and like any normal twelve-year-old boys, we were a little rambunctious. My parents were going to a party across the alley and made a big deal about telling us that we were old enough to be left by ourselves for a little while. I remember my mother's parting words to us: "Now be good. Don't run around the house, and *don't break anything!*"

Being normal twelve-year-old boys, the first thing we did was to begin chasing each other through the house. At one point, as I ran from living

room to dining room to kitchen with my friend trying to tackle me, I heard a crash in the dining room and my friend let out this frightful scream. To my horror, I saw that my mother's brand-new wooden dining room chair had been knocked over by one of us, and the top half had broken off. Fear and remorse seized us as we looked down on that broken chair. We then did what any normal twelve-year-old boys would do: we tried to cover it up.

I was rather ingenious at that age. I locked the door and sent my friend to get some glue out of a drawer, while I went into my parent's closet and got out some brown shoe polish and an old rag. We then glued the piece back onto the top of my mom's brand-new wooden dining room chair and, with the rag and shoe polish, tried to cover over the ragged crack.

At that point my mother, coming to check on us, knocked on the door and demanded to know why we had locked the door. We did what any normal twelve-year-old boys would do at this point: we panicked. I tried to hide the brown stained rag and glue in the utility room as my friend went to open the door. My mother came in and was immediately suspicious. "What's going on here?" she asked as she began to sniff the air.

Like any normal twelve-year-old boys we lied: "Nothing."

"Then why do you have brown shoe polish all over your hands?" she asked.

The jig was up. We then did what any normal twelve-year-old boys do in such instances: we blamed each other. "He did it!" we both said as we pointed our fingers at each other.

"Did what?" my mother said as I noticed her face getting redder and redder.

"Broke your brand-new wooden dining room chair," we shamefully responded expecting God's judgment to fall on us at any moment.

At this point my mother's eyes began to bulge, her lips were pressed tightly as if fire was trying to escape from her mouth, and we just knew she was about to explode. And she did explode—with peals of laughter. She laughed so hard, tears were rolling down her face. She laughed and laughed as she hugged both of us rather confused boys. I thought I had finally sent her over the edge into madness. Years later, she told me that what made her laugh was the brown shoe polish on our hands and faces looking so comical.

This was an experience of grace. Where we had expected harsh judgment and condemnation, we encountered laughter. Where we had thought there was no escape from the wrath about to fall on us, we instead were embraced in forgiveness. Grace is this experience of encountering God's laughter when we expect God's wrath. It is being embraced by God's love when we expect God's rejection of us. Grace is standing before God, our

hands stained with our sin, and being washed clean by laughter, and hugs, and compassion.

This is the strange and mysterious nature of the God we believe in as Presbyterians. This is the God Jesus points to throughout his ministry and in his life. God's grace can be found in Jesus in countless ways, from the many times he sits to eat with tax collectors and prostitutes⁴ to the story he told of a father who welcomes back a rebellious, prodigal son and throws a party for him, much to the chagrin of his other son.⁵ The good news of Jesus Christ is that God's grace comes to us not because we have done anything to deserve it or because we are worthy of it. God's love and forgiveness come to us simply out of the boundless mercy of God's laughter.

This is good news to celebrate with other people. There is no more important message to bring to our culture than God's irresistible grace. Unfortunately, in our high schools and in our society, people are judged according to certain abilities and traits. If you "have what it takes," you increase the likelihood that you will succeed. If you say the right words, believe the right things, do the right actions, then you are deemed worthy of your peers' approval. Those in high school have the experience of seeing people judged and measured every day. How subtle, and sometimes not-so-subtle, the pressures are to fit into a certain mold so that we feel accepted and loved.

Grace teaches us that God loves us where we are and for who we are. Grace is knowing God loves us in the midst of our foolishness and powerlessness. Grace is experiencing God's laughter in our despair. The good news of grace is expressed fully in Paul's letter to the church in Rome. "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus."⁶ This is a rather remarkable thing to believe, is it not?

Finally, "grace without works is empty." We do not believe that our good deeds, our works, save us, even if one of those works is a coming forward during an altar call. Rather, we believe that when we experience grace, we are then led to do the good works expressive of that grace. Because I have experienced God's mercy, I can forgive another. Because God has welcomed me into the kingdom, I can welcome the stranger into my life. Because God loves the lost, I can seek the lost in our society and share God's love with them. Our works do not precede God's grace. They result from God's grace.

However, we should warn you: experiencing God's grace means being changed. Experiencing God's grace is to hear laughter where others only

expect judgment. It is to experience God's embrace where others preach only God's condemnation. It is to look at the world very differently from some of our brothers and sisters. The world needs people changed by God's grace. The world needs people less concerned with their own personal salvation and more concerned with sharing God's grace. This is our job as Presbyterians. We were saved a long time ago, and we are saved every day and we will be saved in the future. Grace is our Word—a good one too.

So What Do *You* Think?

1. Think of your life and/or the life of someone you know. Describe how God's Spirit, in some way and at some time or times, has created new life "from above."
2. Describe various baptisms you've seen or heard about. Were there differences? Similarities? Was there anything moving about any of them? Ho-hum?
3. Imagine that you are Nicodemus (or some other biblical character of your choosing). Now, say or write how the following statement is true for you: "Grace is knowing God loves me in spite of myself." Now, drop the disguise and be yourself. How is the statement true for the real you?

Is the Bible the Literal Word of God, or Just a Long, Boring Book?

DO YOU BELIEVE IN THE BIBLE?

TROUBLED SLEEP

In a conversation at a sleepover with girlfriends, Jamie, a fifteen-year-old Presbyterian, hears Ellen say, "The youth pastor at my church says people who talk about the Bible not being true in every part are really not Christians." Jamie thinks of herself as a Christian, but she begins to wonder. She wonders what her mother, a Presbyterian elder, believes about this and what her pastor would have to say.

Of all the questions asked today of Presbyterians, several of which are discussed in this book, "Do you believe in the Bible?" may be the trickiest. It is the one most open to misinterpretation. The quick answer is: "No, most Presbyterians do not *believe in* the Bible. We *believe in* the Lord of heaven and earth." Obviously, that could provoke the astonished reply: "What? You don't believe in the Bible?" We would respond, yes, we don't believe in the Bible; we believe in God. We don't rest our faith in a *book*, but in *God's living presence*—a presence we discern in Israel's history and see