

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

completely revealed in the Jewish teacher, healer, and prophet named Jesus. Thus, we are making a distinction here: truth is not captured in the words on a page of the Bible but is the living Word who encounters us in those pages. (More about this later in this chapter!)

So, let's ask the big question: Do Presbyterians believe the Bible is the literal Word of God? This question cannot be answered simply. We Presbyterians are (and have been) a cantankerous group who enjoy good debates, particularly about the Bible. There is no doubt that Presbyterians (like

people in other faith-traditions) believe differently among themselves about the Bible, about interpretations of Bible passages, and about almost any other subject you can think of. The joke is that when you get five Presbyterians together, you have eight different interpretations of a Bible passage!

Presbyterian history reflects this debate, and there have been Presbyterians down through the years who have believed that the words of the Bible were literally God's words. Many Presbyterians through the gen-

erations have said something like "Yes, I believe the Bible is the literal Word of God." At least as far back as 1675, a Reformed gathering in Switzerland adopted a statement called the Helvetic Consensus Formula. (You could impress your friends throwing this into a conversation!) It stated that everything about the Bible is inspired—even the tiny vowel markings that later scholars added to the Hebrew words in the First (Old) Testament. The Bible, according to the the Helvetic Consensus Formula, is "the sole and complete rule of our faith and life."¹ Phrased another way, every word in the Bible can be trusted and is to be accepted as God's truth. The folk who created this statement believed that God inspired the writers even in the smallest details, and there are people today who still believe that God can be found in such details.

You sometimes hear people use the word "inerrant" to describe this view of the Bible as inspired even in its smallest details. You may hear others describe themselves as believing in "the inerrant truth of the Bible." Those who hold such inerrancy views argue that the Bible is absolutely true in every respect and without errors of any kind (not only errors of faith, but errors of science, math, and geography too). Inerrantists are one part of a larger group of Protestant fundamentalists who believe that the Bible expresses certain fundamental, inalterable, undeniable truths central to belief.

*Jesus was not
a literalist*

Our church has a long history of wrestling with this understanding of the Bible as inerrant. In both Scotland and the United States during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, divisions developed among Presbyterians based on whether the Presbyterian Church would be guided by a fundamentalism of the "inerrancy school." As you might guess, heated arguments, heresy trials, and splits between inerrantists and noninerrantists resulted.² Presbyterians love to argue, especially about the Bible.

The tendency of Presbyterians to disagree about the Bible continues today, and many of our disputes about certain issues are essentially a result of differing interpretations of scriptures. Yet, even if Presbyterians have different ways of interpreting the Bible, it is central to the beliefs of all Presbyterians that the Bible is crucial to our practice of faith and understanding of God. We believe the "Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be, by the Holy Spirit, the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the Church universal, and God's Word to you."³ So while we may not always agree on particular interpretations, Presbyterians hold the Bible to be central for the discernment of God's will among us. Not only do Presbyterians love to argue, they love to find ways to accept their differences and find what it is we hold in common. The centrality of the Bible is one of those commonalities.

In our view, the problem with many inerrantists, literalists, and fundamentalists is that they claim a particular interpretation to be above all other interpretations. If someone truly took the Bible literally and did everything scripture passages call for, then they would not be eating pork (Leviticus 11:7), wearing certain kinds of clothing (Deuteronomy 22:11), or lending money to people and charging interest (Exodus 22:25). (Banks may not like this biblical teaching!) No one follows every part of the Bible literally, because no one does everything the Bible calls people to do. If we did, we'd be encouraging the cutting out of people's eyes for looking at the cover of the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue (Matthew 5:28–29), and people would be selling everything they own to follow Jesus (Luke 18:22). There is no such thing as a purely literal interpretation of the Bible! Everyone makes choices about what to believe as true in the Bible and what is fundamental in following Jesus. The problem with literalists and fundamentalists is their claim that their interpretations are the only valid ones.

Inerrancy has other problems as well. If some want to argue that the Bible is true in all details, then what do they do with the fact that the earth is not flat or with the notion that heaven exists above the clouds and hell below in the center of the earth? To believe the Bible is true in all details is to assert that epilepsy is caused by demons, and the earth was made in seven twenty-four-hour periods. While some people may want to believe these

things to be literally true, science and common sense show us that the Bible cannot be true in all of its particular details. (You can lose God in the details if you are not careful.)

On occasion, the Bible includes words in one place that are at variance or in conflict with what the Bible says elsewhere. For example, Genesis 1:26–28 teaches that human beings were created male and female at once, after the other creatures, but Genesis 2:7 and 2:18–23 teach that the order was human male, then the creatures, and then human female. Also, the book of Ezra clearly opposes the marriage of Jews who returned from exile in Babylon to the Palestinians whose ancestors were not carried into exile (Ezra 10:9–18). The book of Ruth, in contrast, chronicles the marriage of a Judean Jew named Boaz to a Moabite woman named Ruth, a marriage that was part of the family tree of King David (Ruth 4:18–22) and of Jesus (Matthew 1:5–6, 16).

So in answer to the question about whether Presbyterians believe the Bible to be the literal Word of God, we would respond, “No, because no one *really* believes in the Bible literally.” Some may assert one interpretation over another; they may want to argue the world was made in seven days; and they may want to ignore the obvious contradictions in the Bible; but no one takes the Bible literally all the time! Those who argue for literalism, and who believe in it, worry that if there is not one correct interpretation, then “anything goes” as far as interpreting the Bible is concerned. And the church in the past has used the Bible to argue for just about anything from slavery⁴ to denying women ordination as church officers.⁵ More often than not, a particular interpretation reflects the biases and cultural prejudices of anyone who is an interpreter.

One example of this is the element within the Gospels we could describe as anti-Jewish. Two Gospel accounts—Matthew’s and John’s—strongly blame Jewish officials and, to some extent, Jewish people in general for being too much under the influence of Jewish religious leaders who, it is alleged, conspired to engineer Jesus’ arrest and cruel death by crucifixion (Matthew 26:3–4; 27:25; John 11:47–53; 19:12–16). That’s the angle that has provided a “biblical” rationale for anti-Semitism across the centuries. Anti-Semitism labels Jewish people as “Christ-killers.” It cannot be said long enough or loudly enough that this interpretation and rationale are wrong! To articulate a biblical rationale for attacks on our Jewish brothers and sisters is a great misuse of scripture even though there are passages seemingly in support of this view. To say this is a truth for all time and places is to make prejudice a truth of certain writers in the first century. That prejudice, in fact, is untrue to the spirit and life of Jesus Christ.

Historically, of course, Jesus was not present when the New Testament was written and, thus, could not intervene editorially and prevent such bitter references from being written in scripture. Also, Jesus was not physically present to argue with future anti-Jewish interpreters. We do, however, remember that Jesus himself was no “Christian.” He was a Jew. The Bible, however, has at least one voice speaking directly against such broad and biased comments as those. The apostle Paul was physically around to add his two cents’ worth. In three chapters of Romans (chapters 9, 10, and 11), Paul answers the question: “What about those of the Jewish faith-tradition in light of God’s revelation of faith and salvation through Jesus?” Paul’s conclusion, drawn from his understanding of the scriptures, is that God made a covenant promise to the Jewish people through Abraham and Sarah—a promise fulfilled in a Jewish rabbi-healer named Jesus—and God does not go back, or renege, on God’s promises. Not ever! (Remember: Grace rules!)

If God’s covenant promise to those of the Jewish faith-tradition continues irrevocably, “Christ-killers” is a label of bigotry based on anger in the early Christian communities such as those to whom Matthew and John wrote. Their anger was understandably directed toward Jewish religious leaders who opposed the new Christian movement in their synagogues and in the temple. There were even accounts of persecution toward the early Christians. But to use these biases as a literal interpretation and therefore condemnation of Jews throughout history is to misuse scripture in a harmful and destructive way. It makes the Bible more about our human words than the Word of God present in the Jesus Christ of scripture.

Jesus, as Jewish rabbi and student of the scriptures, was not a literalist when interpreting scripture. More than once (we’re told), Jesus introduced teachings by saying, “You have heard it said . . . But I say to you . . .” (see Matthew 5:27–28, 31–32, 33–34, 38–39, 43–44). In these cases, Jesus’ interpretations of scripture are broader and are applied to more situations than the interpretations of the literalists.

Jesus also seemed to recognize that parts of scripture contradict other parts of scripture. One place in the Bible states that God punishes sinners (Deuteronomy 24:16). This idea is that when something bad happens, it probably was your fault because you sinned in some way. (See Job for an argument against this as well.) In Luke 13:1–5, however, Jesus challenges that interpretation “head on.” Jesus interprets that “bad things” happen not as punishment on people for their sinfulness, but rather that a tragedy can happen to anyone. Further, he teaches that no one is so much an insider with God that repentance is not necessary, including repentance for thinking oneself better than others. If Jesus was not a literalist when knowing about

Deuteronomy 24:16 and interpreting events described in Luke 13, why should any of us think we should be literalists? Jesus is our stumbling block if we apply beliefs or interpretations to him that manipulate others or ourselves and that were not Jesus' beliefs and interpretations in the first place.

WORD OR WORDS?

Let's go back to Jamie at the sleepover with her teen friends. Jamie has heard that if someone doesn't believe one particular interpretation of the Bible, then that person is not considered Christian. We've discussed how off-base this position is. As was said, she wonders what her mother, a Presbyterian elder, believes about this and what her pastor would have to say. That's our question too: How do Presbyterians approach the Bible and the ways it guides our faith and life?

First and foremost, Presbyterians believe there is a greater purpose for scripture in "the big picture" of life, history, and God's relationship with God's people. What might that be? Or, how might that be? Scripture's greater purpose—through stories and teachings and prayers—is to reveal the past, present, and future of God's love, justice, and power in relationship with people and creation, all with a goal of life being made new. Presbyterians focus less on the literal human words and more on discerning the Word testified to in those human words. Always we strive to look beyond the black and white letters to encounter the Spirit present in the stories, prayers, and teachings of the Bible.

How does this understanding of scripture influence our approach to scripture? First, this approach recognizes much (even all) of scripture has passed down from generation to generation certain themes and ideas about God. The themes that reappear over and over are often more highly regarded because they show up repeatedly. This approach is different from one taken by many people who use proof-texting to make their assertion of truth. In proof-texting, a person cites one particular verse to support an argument. It has been said, you could proof-text any idea you can come up with. The approach we prefer takes seriously how certain themes, for example, are consistent throughout Jesus' teachings. Such themes may be regarded as having more weight in a given argument than one particular verse. We, therefore, measure "scripture against scripture" to gain a deeper and truer understanding of God's intent for us in scripture.⁶

Presbyterians (and others) believe it's important to examine scripture in Hebrew and Greek when possible and to consider differences in various English translations. We also value studying the cultures and assumptions

of Bible writers in their day and time. This includes studying the nuances of language. (We saw how important that was in the last chapter.) Additionally, we strive to hear the many voices underlying any particular text. The Bible is a library of people's experiences of God shaped by their culture and context. And in our reading of that library we can encounter God ourselves. This is why we strive to listen to the Word among all the words of scripture.

One nonliteralist, noninerrantist way to approach scripture is by understanding that scripture is both a gathering of words and a testimony to and by God's Word (with a capital "W"). There's an eternal Word of God in the midst and through the words of scripture. Proverbs 8:1–21 and 8:22–9:6 characterize God's Wisdom as an eternal Word of positive teaching. John 1:1–5 and 1:14–18, as well as Colossians 1:15–20, testify to Jesus as the embodiment of God's eternal Word.

Jesus, then, with his life and ministry, helps us to understand better God's personality. Jesus further helps us to hear God's Word through the words of scripture (some of which are in contradiction to others) by encouraging study, reason, prayer, interpreted experiences, and grateful service to others as avenues through which God's eternal Word meets us in human events and relationships.

We believe God encounters us through scripture and, through these encounters, day by day changes our lives. It's also been said that our reading of the Bible as scripture is secondary to the primary ability of the Bible as scripture to "read" us.⁷ As scripture "reads us" and we comprehend something of that "reading," God's life-made-new encounters us and comes alive within us. We are blessed and we are challenged as well.

Individual responses to God's Word are not always positive. Luke 4:16–30 relates the incident of Jesus reading scripture and preaching in his "home" synagogue in Nazareth. Jesus that day told stories from scripture that revealed God's graciousness to "outsiders." (Jesus was probably proud of Martin Luther King who preached a very similar message.) The religious people of the Nazareth synagogue worshiping with Jesus back then thought of those to whom Jesus referred as different from and as inferior to themselves as citizens of Nazareth.

The stories to which Jesus referred were from 1 Kings 17:1 and 17:8–16 and 2 Kings 5:1–14. The worshipers at Nazareth, as the story goes from Luke 4, became enormously angry at Jesus' method of interpreting scripture. Jesus' method sought to hear the timeless, truthful, healing Word of God through the many words of scripture. His use of the scripture from Isaiah 61:1–2 and Leviticus 25:10 referred to God as One to be celebrated

for God's delivering and barrier-removing power. But there's a claim on people then and now who receive God's delivering and barrier-removing power. That claim moves us beyond a "hallelujah" in receiving this power. The claim became a challenge for all God's people: to live with others as co-celebrants because God brings barriers down! The religious people of Jesus' hometown that day were angry when Jesus told of God wanting to bring down barriers that they hoped would stay in place. Their responses back then and ours today are not always positive responses as God desires, but God does not give up on us!

WHY AND HOW WE READ THE BIBLE!

Why? Because scripture presents timeless stories, teachings, and prayers that offer guidance to people through the ages. That guidance is received as the words of scripture, by God's Spirit, communicate a living Word to encounter God's people (others and us!) and to create new life within us.

And how? Not as literalists. If Jesus was not a literalist, but one who studied, observed, taught, and healed from a radical faithfulness to God, and if we acknowledge this Jesus as the One-in-flesh who is God's Eternal Word, why would we want to be literalists? If we are literalists, there's a higher degree of likelihood we will stumble over Jesus because we are preferring many literal words (sometimes contradicting one another) to the nonliteralist Word-in-flesh who Jesus is.

Instead of literalism, we try to read scripture (and experience scripture reading us) with interpretations that include consideration of: (1) issues when such scripture was first, and later, told and heard; (2) how the scripture being examined has been influenced by previous scripture; (3) Jesus' teachings on similar matters; and (4) what developments in and around us are related to the particular scripture being studied. Such developments either cry out for God's holy love drawing near or give evidence positively that God's holiness is being experienced.

Reading the Bible this way takes effort—prayer, research, study, thought, conversation. But for those willing to read, pray, research, study, think, and converse with one another as participants in communities of faith, the effort will be rewarded with multiple experiences of the Bible as being full of words that testify to the Word of God giving life fully.

And what's more, those who study scripture this way will be strengthened for life's hardest times and life's most difficult struggles because familiarity with the words of scripture will make the presence of God's Word all the more clear as God draws near (see Luke 24:13–35).

So, "Is the Bible the literal Word of God, or just a long, boring book?"

It is neither. And, as God's gift, contradictions and all, it is so much more. It's the well from which God's Word is drawn for drink as we thirst for that Word in life. It is the source and sustenance of our living relationship with God. It challenges us; it comforts us; it points us to ways of life with new horizons. The Bible is God's Word to us. We should not cheapen it by trying to make it fit literally into categories for which it was not intended. If Jesus was not a literalist, why would we think Jesus wants us to be literalists?

So What Do *You* Think?

1. Have you ever experienced this debate about the Bible between fundamentalists and nonfundamentalists? What happened? What were the issues and questions?
2. Read again the story of Jamie at the beginning of this chapter. If you were in Jamie's situation, would you: (a) say something like, "Jesus was not a literalist. Why should I be one?" (b) say nothing, but think, "Jesus was not a literalist. Why should I be one?" or (c) say or think something different (and, if so, what)?
3. Have you ever had times when something in the Bible really spoke to you? If so, describe one of those times. Did the Bible comfort you? confront you? challenge you? motivate you? Did it make you feel some other way?