

and compassion. Life is more a celebration than a test to see the fitness of our souls.

A convincing argument can be made saying that, when we meet God in the afterlife, God's first question may well be "Why didn't you have more joy?"

One final story before we "get the hell out of here." This is a story about how Alex's mother joined the Presbyterian Church. She was living in Omaha, Nebraska, and pregnant with him when, one day, a Presbyterian minister knocked on her front door. She invited him in, and he began to tell her that they were starting up a new Presbyterian church just down the road. He wanted to invite her to attend their worship service. Having been raised in the Southern Baptist Church, she had a few questions about what Presbyterians believe. She said, "Well, my husband smokes, and, while I wish he wouldn't, I don't think he is going to hell for that."

The Presbyterian minister said, "Presbyterians believe that is between you and God, and that it is no one else's business. There are some Presbyterians who smoke, and there are some who don't."

Mom wasn't quite satisfied, and so she asked again, "Now, I like to have a drink now and again, and I don't think that is sinful either."

The minister said, "Well, some Presbyterians drink, and some don't."

Finally, Mom said, "And I really love to dance and don't see anything wrong with that either."

The minister replied, "Ma'am, all Presbyterians dance!" The next week she joined the Presbyterian Church.

We dance because we are grateful! Amen!

So What Do *You* Think?

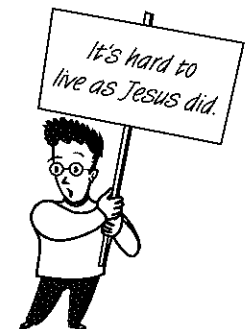
1. What do you think Jesus could have meant when he said, "God is not a God of the dead, but a God of the living" (Matthew 22:32)?

2. Compare your views of "heaven" and "hell" now with what you thought when you were younger. Have your thoughts and beliefs changed some over the years?

3. Think about these two images as they describe the way some people live: "stewing in guilt" and "dancing in gratitude." Describe what comes to mind about these two ways of living.

Is Jesus "Lord," or Just a Good Guy?

Allison and Seth are next-door neighbors. Both are fifteen years old, and neither is from a family that regularly participates in the life of a community of faith. One evening, ten days before Easter, Seth is at Allison's checking on a chemistry class assignment he'd missed because of an appointment at the doctor.



The television is on, and while taking a break from molecular reconfigurations during chemical changes, they notice a commercial being broadcast for an upcoming Easter drama at a large church in a nearby city. First, there's a ten-second preview of Jesus carrying his cross through the crowds, collapsing along the way, then a ten-second scene of the crucifixion, which leads to a fifteen-second scene from the burial garden early on Sunday morning. As the name of the church and a schedule of the pageant's performances are printed along the bottom of the screen, Allison said, "That looked a little weird to me."

"What's that?" asked Seth.

"Jesus and those followers giving 'high-fives' to celebrate his being raised from the dead."

"Guess I hadn't thought about it," replied Seth, "but now that you mention it. . . ."

"From what I know," Allison said, "Jesus must have been a good guy, but what's a thinking person supposed to make of a scene outside a tomb,

with the guy who was buried suddenly 'up and out' in a victory celebration with his friends, all after his life had ended and he'd been closed in there a couple of days before?"

"Maybe he wasn't completely dead when they buried him," Seth suggested.

"Possibly," Allison said, "but the narrator's voice said, 'He died for your sins. Won't you come celebrate with us the new life you too can have in a personal relationship with him? He wants to be Lord and Savior of your life.' I don't know much about the Jesus and Easter stuff, but 'high-fives' outside the grave is not really a turn-on to me."

"We could ask Charlene what she thinks. She's a member at the Episcopal Church," Seth proposed.

"Or Billy. He's a member at Southside Assembly of God," countered Allison.

"Let's call 'em, and see what they say."

"Maybe," said Allison, "but only after we finish going over your chemistry."

"Deal," agreed Seth as he turned back to the next set of review questions.

DO YOU HAVE A PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP WITH JESUS CHRIST?

Allison and Seth rightly wonder, "Who is Jesus? Who is this Jesus who was crucified, buried, and said to be alive again beyond the grave? Who is this Jesus that some call 'Lord and Savior'? Who is this Jesus with whom, it is said, we can have some sort of relationship?"

Indeed, a question Presbyterians are often asked is: Do you have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ? That is, to put it mildly, a loaded question—loaded with meanings. To begin with, the question not only implies that the questioner thinks that such a relationship with Jesus Christ is good and desirable but also carries the presumption that such a relationship is necessary for salvation. (As was noted in chapter 1: "For the neo-evangelical Christian . . . , the significant event in a Christian's salvation is this moment of acceptance or conversion.")

To get right to the point, a Presbyterian can confidently answer, "Yes, I do have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ," but more needs to be said about what Presbyterians understand by such a statement. There are three key elements involved here: Jesus, Christ, and personal relationship. Let's look at them one at a time.

Jesus—This is a name, of course, and it refers to a person who lived in history. As Allison and Seth watched the television advertisement for the upcoming Easter drama, they remarked that they didn't know much about this Jesus. What more could they know? Based on information we glean mostly from scripture and from related first-century writings, we know that Jesus was a Jewish teacher and healer, born about two thousand years ago, growing up in the area of Galilee, who, at about the age of thirty years, was crucified in Jerusalem by Roman authorities.

Christ—The word "Christ" is not a name, but a theological label. It comes from a Greek word meaning "promised" or "anointed." The same term in Hebrew is "messiah." In the First (or Old) Testament, the term "Christ" (messiah) was used to describe the hope that God would send a specially appointed person (an "anointed one") who would save God's people from their enemies and establish God's will on earth. In the Gospel of Matthew, when Peter says to Jesus, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God . . ." (16:16), Matthew wants us to understand that Peter is confessing his faith that this Jesus is, indeed, the *Christ*, God's promised messiah.

Although Peter may in fact have called Jesus "the Christ," just as Matthew writes, many Bible scholars hold the opinion that the term "Christ" was applied to Jesus only after the resurrection. Without question, the Gospel accounts proclaim that Jesus is the Christ, that Jesus, who suffered and died unjustly, was raised beyond death by God's power, and is the promised one of God, the fulfillment of God's covenant promise with Israel dating back to Abram and Sarai (Genesis 12). But it is likely that the church did not understand all this about Jesus until after his death and resurrection, after they were able to view him through the lens of their faith in his risen presence with them.

So when Matthew says that Peter called Jesus "the Christ" before his resurrection, this is likely a reading back into the story of Jesus' life a view of him that developed later. It is Matthew's way of saying that what we now know to be true about Jesus *because* of the resurrection—that he is the Christ—was true about him *before* the resurrection, even if Peter did not use the exact term. "If they didn't call Jesus 'Christ,'" Matthew seems to be saying, "they could have. And if they'd thought about it, they would have."¹

So we have Jesus, and we have Christ—"Jesus Christ." Is this a name? Not exactly. It is a name and a title—Jesus (name) who is the Christ (title). The title Christ is attached to the person's name Jesus (The name "Jesus," incidentally, means "deliverer" and is a derivative of the Hebrew name Joshua).² As for the existence of the person Jesus, this is a matter of historical record. You don't have to be a person of faith to say that there was a

Jesus any more than you have to be a scientist to say that there was a man named Einstein—it's a historical fact. However, to say "Jesus Christ," to call this man Jesus "the Christ," is to combine the name of a particular historical person with the mystery of what is claimed in faith. Remember that combination: history, mystery, and faith.

Personal Relationship—Now we are ready to think about what it could mean to have a "personal relationship" with Jesus the Christ. To say that we have a personal relationship with Jesus the Christ is another way of saying that the man Jesus in his role as the Christ makes a difference to us here and now. Do Presbyterians believe Jesus makes a difference? Yes. Absolutely. But how?

When Presbyterians talk about the difference that Jesus Christ makes, they often use two terms: the "person" and the "work" of Jesus Christ. The "person" of Jesus Christ refers to the belief that Jesus Christ makes a difference particularly because of *who* he is—his identity. Jesus was connected to God in a way that is unique. Historically, the church has argued over and wrestled with how to describe this uniqueness, saying such things as Jesus Christ was an equal person in the Trinity or that he was fully human while at the same time being fully divine.³

The "work" of Jesus Christ refers to *what he did*, or the accomplishment that theologically is called "atonement." Atonement means the "making as one again" what had become broken, alienated, and estranged. We, of course, as sinful human beings, are broken, alienated, and estranged. Presbyterians join with other Christians in saying that God did not abandon sinful humanity, staying aloof in heaven, but that in Jesus, God became personally involved in repairing broken human beings. In Jesus Christ, the holy God became "God is with us" (Matthew 1:23c, quoting Isaiah 7:14; 8:8, 10).⁴

But how did God do this? How did Jesus Christ accomplish the "work" of atonement? Over the years, at least three different general interpretations of atonement have been described and argued. Presbyterians have found meaning and value in all three:

1. *"Christus Victor" (Christ the Victor)*—This view sees Jesus Christ as doing battle with the powers of sin and evil and defeating them. Jesus is a kind of military hero in the war to save humanity—but unlike ordinary military heroes, Jesus lived a life of gentleness and compassion and he surrendered to death on a cross. On Easter, by God's power Jesus was raised to new life and granted the victory that liberates humanity from the evil powers.

2. *Substitution*—This view sees Jesus on the cross as taking our place, substituting himself for us and taking on himself that anger of God and the punishment that is rightfully deserved by all of us as sinners.
3. *Moral Influence*—This view sees what Jesus did on the cross as a powerful expression of God's love for humanity. This extraordinary example leads and moves God's people to repentance and the experience of reconciliation.⁵

Put this all together, then, and we can begin to understand what Presbyterians mean by a "personal relationship with Jesus Christ." They mean that a man who lived two thousand years ago—Jesus—was no ordinary man. He was also the Christ, God's anointed one, sent to save sinful humanity. Because of who he was and what he did, Jesus made atonement for our sin, repairing the broken relationship between humanity and God. This Jesus Christ was raised by God from the dead and lives today, working in our lives to liberate us from all that would destroy us.

For Presbyterians past and present, a personal relationship with Jesus who is the Christ makes a difference in life and history. How that relationship is experienced, interpreted, and understood, throughout the years of a person's life, may vary from childhood through adulthood. It's always, however, a process of studying, discussing, praying, and considering. Remember the combination of history, mystery, and faith!

You and we and all who consider Jesus and God's call through Word and Spirit are part of the process of history, mystery, and faith. Interpretations and affirmations about Jesus may change from childhood through adulthood. That is natural. In fact, it could be classified a matter of sadness, even tragedy, if any of us ever stopped considering and reconsidering God, Jesus, Spirit, God's people, and the relationship of these.

Never, though, is the personal relationship with God through Jesus (as important as that is) all that's involved between God and God's people.

PERSONAL SALVATION AND/OR COMMUNITY CELEBRATION?

Remember the story of Allison and Seth at the beginning of this chapter? Neither of them thought they knew too much about Jesus. Even so, something made them resistant to the idea that the risen Jesus would give "high-fives" to his disciples on Easter. Allison and Seth rightly sense that something is off-balance or amiss in the television commercial they saw about the upcoming Easter pageant.

Indeed, according to scripture (see Matthew 28; Luke 24; John 20 and 21; and Acts 1), the resurrection of Jesus provokes as much fear, anxiety, puzzlement, amazement, and questioning, as it does joy. This is true among those who actually encounter the risen Christ as well as among those who just hear about it from others. If Easter were only about personal salvation—me and Jesus—then only joyful “high-fives” outside the empty tomb would make sense. But Easter goes way beyond just personal salvation, and this is why it creates both joy and fear, amazement and anxiety. Because of Easter, the world can never be the same again. We can never be the same. The God who sent Jesus into the world, sends us into the world, too, to do God’s work. Because of Easter, the whole world is ultimately involved, and Jesus’ disciples are challenged to learn that God’s call and life for them include others, all others, whether those others actually confess the same faith in Jesus or not. All are neighbors; all are brothers and sisters under the Lordship of God in Jesus.

This is why Christian faith is lived out in something called “church.” The word “church” means those “called out,” or “called together from out of a larger group.” God’s people in Jesus are called out together for service as we celebrate and share with others the new life God gives. This faith asks more of us than simply either celebrating in joy or being stuck in our anxiety, puzzlement, amazement, and questioning. Beyond any of our very human reactions, we learn and are led to realize that “Christian hope is not limited to the fulfillment of individual life. [Christian hope] insists that personal and communal hope are inseparable.”⁶

This understanding has also been argued by John Calvin, the mid-sixteenth-century theologian whose thought has been so formative for Presbyterians. Calvin wrote:

We ought to embrace the whole human race without exception in a single feeling of love; here there is no distinction between barbarian and Greek, worthy and unworthy, friend and enemy, since all should be contemplated in God, not in themselves. . . . Therefore, if we rightly direct our love, we must first turn our eyes not to man, the sight of whom would more often engender hate than love, but to God, who bids us extend to all men the love we bear to [God], that this may be an unchanging principle: whatever the character of the man, we must yet love him because we love God.⁷

Jesus’ person and work have roots in history. Jesus’ person and work also are surrounded by the mystery of God through the faith claim of the

disciples and the church that Jesus is Messiah (Christ). And the mystery of God is continually involved in the shaping of human lives as Jesus lived and taught, that by God’s grace all human beings belong to God and are created, redeemed, and given new life from birth through death as members of the human family.

If Allison and Seth called a Presbyterian friend to ask about Jesus, they might hear something like “Presbyterians believe that Jesus is Lord, but each person, day by day, year by year, as a disciple, is called to study and consider prayerfully how Jesus’ life and Lordship have a shaping effect on each one’s life.”

Presbyterian pastor Bob Walkup, it is said, once preached a memorable sermon in which the refrain was something like “It’s hard to be a Christian!” Yes, it is hard to be a Christian, especially in the sense that it’s hard to live as Jesus did. It’s hard to live as Jesus urged disciples to live: loving those who are different from oneself and one’s group; learning from those who are different from oneself and one’s group.

It’s hard to be a Christian, but that’s what we’re attempting when we both join with others in celebrating God’s new life for the world and join with others for serving as God leads us among God’s wonderfully diverse people.

So What Do *You* Think?

1. Using whatever means you choose—creative writing, mime, music, art—depict your relationship to Jesus.
2. Suppose you got the chance to interview Jesus about his life and work. What are the most important questions you would like to ask? How do you think Jesus would answer those questions, and why?