

# Being Presbyterian in the Bible Belt

A THEOLOGICAL SURVIVAL GUIDE  
FOR YOUTH, PARENTS, AND OTHER  
CONFUSED PRESBYTERIANS



Addressing such questions as "Is the Bible the Literal Word of God or just a Long, Boring Book?" this is an easy-to-understand, slightly irreverent approach to theology and the kind of theological musings that many youth and others have today.

*Being Presbyterian in the Bible Belt* acknowledges that though the views expressed in questions like "Are you saved?" "Do you have a personal relationship with Jesus?" and "Are you going to heaven?" are popular in this culture, those are not the only ways to understand being a Christian. Foote and Thornburg help Presbyterian young people articulate their faith and respond to these questions from a mainline point of view.

This is an ideal book for adolescents  
and young adults and those who nurture them.

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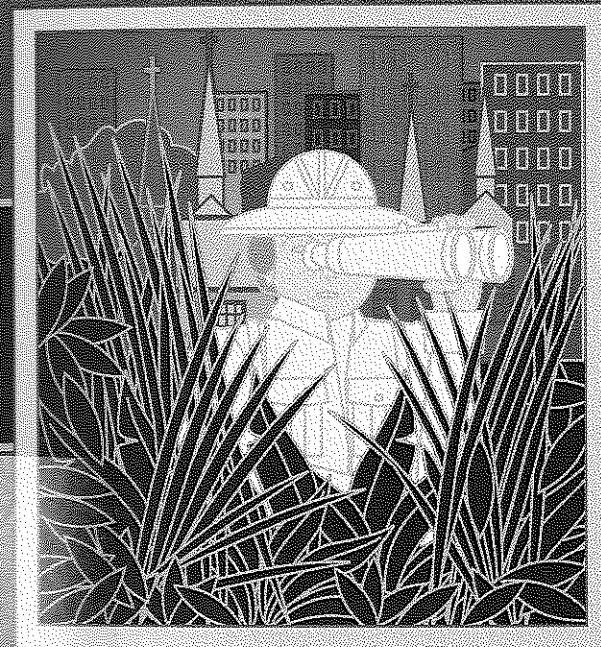


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GUIDE FOR YOUTH, PARENTS, AND  
OTHER CONFUSED PRESBYTERIANS



Ted V. Foote Jr. & P. Alex Thornburg

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## Contents

Preface ix

Introduction: Being Presbyterian in the Bible Belt (and Elsewhere) xi

1. Are You Saved, or Are You Presbyterian? 1
2. Is the Bible the Literal Word of God, or Just a Long, Boring Book? 9
3. Are You Going to Heaven, or to Tulsa? 19
4. Is Jesus "Lord," or Just a Good Guy? 27
5. Are Only 144,000 Saved? 35
6. When Will the World End, or Did It End in the 1960s? 43
7. Do Presbyterians Have Spirit, or Do They Just Drink Them? 51
8. Why Don't You Repent in Dust and Ashes? 59
9. Who's in Charge? 67

Epilogue 77

Notes 81

## Preface

In 1955 one of us was almost two years old and the other was “not yet” by a handful of years. That year Westminster Press published Robert McAfee Brown’s *The Bible Speaks to You*, a book with a respectful, holy, and appropriate sense of humor about human nature and the Bible. Brown hoped to assist high school and college age youth, young adults, and anyone else reading the Bible toward an awareness of how modern critical scholarship, sound biblical interpretation, and contemporary life intersect. His treatment of the power and promise of the Bible can be read and studied again and again.

When Dr. Brown wrote *The Bible Speaks to You* forty-five years ago, he was aware of a conflict between “fundamentalist” and “liberal” schools of interpretation. Finding neither school completely helpful for living out one’s faith, Brown attempted to assist his readers in walking a different, “third route” in their journeys of biblical interpretation and theological and spiritual growth.

Since that time, when Dwight Eisenhower was president of the United States, the church and culture have changed some, to say the least. Now the broad mainline theological perspective from which Brown wrote is very much a minority perspective on a religious landscape dominated by other viewpoints. These other theological perspectives promote their own “majority views” on the faith with such energy, enthusiasm, and media visibility that youth and adults seeking “another way” may not even know other ways exist.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is aware of the challenge to articulate its theology to a new generation. In 1998 the General Assembly approved a set of catechisms for use by children, youth, and adults. The effort poured into the catechism project and the contribution it makes to faith education are developments we applaud. Even so, we believe that more is still needed by disciples, younger and older. If the catechisms help provide a foundation and a framework for a person's house of faith, we hope this book will help readers think through how this house can be furnished and arranged. Catechisms are for insiders; they give answers to faith questions we Presbyterians ask ourselves. In this "survival guide" we hope to do the opposite: to respond to "outsiders," to address the questions non-Presbyterians ask us.

However, this is no book of easy answers. It is, rather, an effort to hear the religious questions people ask Presbyterians, to interpret those questions, and to explore how Presbyterians can respond out of the richness and the depth of both the Bible and our Reformed and Presbyterian faith tradition. We hope these chapters make some contribution to the quest for Presbyterians to live faithfully and joyfully in service to the Lord of heaven and earth. Other ways of seeing and living the Christian faith are worthy and blessed by God, yet we are unapologetic about the Reformed and Presbyterian tradition, having been strengthened by it ourselves and confident that others may be also.

The debt of gratitude we owe to family, mentors, fellow disciples, and life-pilgrims older and younger, as well as the editorial team at Geneva Press, is surpassed only by the debt of gratitude we owe to God. Living with and among congregations we have served has shaped many of our insights about the Reformed faith. Additionally, we have truly learned what it means to be Presbyterian in the Bible Belt from congregations in Tulsa, Owasso, and Stillwater, Oklahoma, and in Dallas, Gatesville, Waco, Austin, Pasadena, San Antonio, Henderson, and Rusk County, Texas. Of course, any shortcomings or errors found in these pages are attributable only to the two of us.

God began a conversation with God's people long before any of us were ever conceived. We hope and pray this volume will make a contribution to that ages-long conversation to the end that we may more clearly discern the grace surrounding us all. With humility and boldness rooted in God's grace, we count it a privilege to be engaged in dialogue with those who read these pages.

*Sola Gloria Dei,*

P. Alex Thornburg

Ted V. Foote, Jr.

## Introduction

### Being Presbyterian in the Bible Belt (and Elsewhere)

**Entering the Bible Belt  
Not a region  
but a state of mind**

- Tina, a fifteen-year-old, shares the experience of a close friend who constantly asked her, was she saved and, if so, had she been baptized as an adult? Her friend was scandalized and somewhat worried when she found out Tina had been baptized as a baby and couldn't give her a time and place when she "accepted Jesus as her personal Lord and Savior." "Don't you Presbyterians believe in being saved?" her friend asked. Tina was confused, upset, and angry. She knew she didn't believe what her friend was saying, but she couldn't articulate what she really believed.

*"You Presbyterians are the problem."*

*—Andrew Young*

- An upset mother calls her pastor because her son has been going to another church's youth group and has come home wrestling with questions she doesn't know how to answer. He's told her, "Mom, they want me to be baptized and immersed. They say I won't go to heaven unless I do. They even say unless I get you to come to their church, you aren't saved either." The

mother doesn't know how to respond and asks the pastor what she should do.

- A Presbyterian church member struggles to explain to his neighbor what he, as a Presbyterian, believes about the biblical book of Revelation. "Will you be taken up in the rapture?" his neighbor asks. "Taken where?" the church member says aloud. The next Sunday the member asks his pastor if they could do a study on the book of Revelation. "Maybe in the third millennium," the pastor says.

When was I saved? Do we believe in the rapture? Do we believe some people are going to hell? Do we believe the Bible is literally true? These are some of the questions Presbyterians have been asking over the years, questions often first posed to them by friends who come from fundamentalist churches.

While the issues examined in the following pages are matters that cross all sorts of lines (geographic, ideological, and generational), this book arises out of our experiences as ministers who live and preach in the Bible Belt—which is not so much a place as it is a state of mind. These chapters reflect our personal journeys of faith and discovery in that particular brand of Christianity called Presbyterian. Obviously, we also believe the issues we continue to struggle with in this book also reflect the questions many of you face in everyday life.

We have listened to many members, young and old, strive to understand what it means to call ourselves Presbyterian. This question becomes especially acute when we find ourselves in dialogue with fundamentalist Christian perspectives. To live in the Bible Belt (and elsewhere) is to find oneself in conversation with people who have no idea what Presbyterians believe, or why. The problem, of course, is that often we don't really know how to express what we believe either. We hope and intend that this book will address that challenge.

## THE FREEDOM IN BEING A MINORITY IN A BIBLE BELT CULTURE

It wasn't too long ago that the majority of Christians in the United States identified themselves with what are called "mainline traditional churches," which customarily means Methodist, Episcopal, United Church of Christ, Lutheran, Disciples of Christ, and Presbyterians. In the early part of this century, to be Christian was essentially to worship in one of these traditions. The larger churches in many communities were part of these traditions. One

was a Presbyterian because one's parents were Presbyterian, and to be Presbyterian was to be part of a majority in society, part of the establishment. Being Presbyterian was unquestioned—or, at least, the questions were less pressing—because we were the *norm* as mainline Christians and not the *exception*.

Increasingly, this is no longer true. To be Presbyterian today is to be part of a minority. A greater number of Christians in the United States today identify themselves with more conservative, neo-evangelical<sup>2</sup> theological traditions. The larger churches are no longer "mainline" but megachurches that emphasize a particular slant on scripture, namely an emphasis on saving lost souls. Presbyterians no longer represent the Christian norm; neo-evangelicals do. Moreover, in addition to the neo-evangelical Christian majority, there are also more Muslims in the United States than there are Presbyterians at this time.<sup>3</sup> To be Presbyterian is no longer to be assured of being part of the "in-church" people are expected to attend.

This is not necessarily a bad thing. While numerical losses in membership can surely be disconcerting, at the same time we are now free to embrace our belief not because it is what our parents believed or because the majority of Americans hold our view, but because it best expresses our experience of God. To be Presbyterian today is to *decide* to claim those core affirmations that make us Presbyterian. While Presbyterians may not have the political and financial clout we once had, we have something far more important: a liberating understanding of the gospel. We can claim this gospel as a minority community seeking to be faithful to our calling rather than as part of the majority opinion. We can learn much from other minorities (such as the Jewish community) who have held on to their core beliefs and values in the face of a dominant culture. Being part of a minority requires us to examine our basic beliefs, particularly as such beliefs come into conversation and even conflict with more dominant viewpoints. The good news is that God has a tendency to speak through minority viewpoints.<sup>4</sup> God is funny that way!

## THE IMPORTANCE IN BEING A CONFESSING CHURCH

Why is it so important for us to be able to know and to say what we believe as Presbyterian? First, we understand ourselves to be part of a confessing church. This means that the way we speak of our faith has a *history*, and we join with other Christians in affirming the confessions of faith Christians have made down through the ages (such as the Apostles' Creed). However, it also means that is important to be able to confess the faith *today*, to affirm

in this new time and place all those historic creeds as our own. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) *Book of Confessions* contains confessions that come all the way from the early days of the church (the Apostles' Creed) to our own time (A Brief Statement of Faith, 1991). Each of these confessions represents an attempt to articulate the basic nucleus of the faith in light of some new circumstance or conflict in history. To be a confessing church is to take a stand and state what we believe. This is part of what being Presbyterian is about.

Second, it is important to confess our faith because of the uncertainty of our world today. With the variety of beliefs and claims to truth in our amazingly small world, there is much ambivalence about what exactly to believe. There are many who even give up believing in anything. In this time of uncertainty and disbelief, it is our task as one part of our Lord's church to share with the world what we believe and why. We do this with humility and respect for other beliefs. (See the last chapter for why this is.) One of the statements of faith in the Presbyterian *Book of Confessions* is called The Theological Declaration of Barmen.<sup>5</sup> This confession came out of the church in Germany during the 1930s as the Nazi party began to take over all aspects of German society, including the church. A minority (there's that word again) of churches came together and made a short affirmation of faith: "Jesus Christ is Lord." Not Hitler, not the Nazi party, not any particular political perspective—nothing takes precedence over that truth. Only Christ is the head of the church, and only Christ is ultimately to be obeyed. These are dangerous views in a world in which affirming them might get you killed.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, how Jesus is understood becomes an issue in such a debate. Professor Karl Barth, teaching in Germany in 1934, preached a sermon on December 10 wherein he stated emphatically, "Jesus Christ was a Jew." Some left the church during the sermon in protest.<sup>7</sup> One wonders, if more preachers had confessed this truth, how different history might have been.

Can you see now how important it can be to state what you believe?

## THERE BE DRAGONS HERE

There are some dangers we face here. First, we will be talking about faith views and doing theology together, and this is not easy or safe work. Presbyterians often fervently disagree on issues (which is part of the fun of being Presbyterian!), and we are aware of how risky it is to try to speak for all Presbyterians, to attempt to say clearly what we hold in common. You may even disagree with some things written in this book. We hope so,

since the very fact of your disagreement would mean that you are using the brain God gave you and expects you to use.<sup>8</sup> Still, we passionately believe Presbyterians have a vital message to bring to the world today, and we want to try to give voice to the basic beliefs of Presbyterians and to affirm our theological tradition.

Another danger in this book is that some readers may think that we are engaging in fundamentalist bashing. To be sure, we are writing out of the conviction that much of what is communicated to our culture as the Christian message is distorted and misleading. Much of what certain Christians claim to be "true" is, we would argue, unbiblical. Therefore, we *are* attempting to articulate basic Presbyterian beliefs in conversation with those who espouse a more fundamentalist perspective of our faith, fully aware that their perspective tends to dominate the religious discussion in our present society. We answer the questions asked by others with what we believe to be Presbyterian answers. But to "bash" other Christians would itself be un-Presbyterian. We believe our brothers and sisters of the neo-evangelical tradition have much to teach us in our conversations. Their contribution to the shaping of our understanding of the mystery of God is valuable too.

Presbyterians have always understood themselves as one particular expression of a much larger church, one faith community among many. This is why the Presbyterian Church has embraced the ecumenical movement and affirms attempts to support the unity of the whole church. That is why we accept other churches' baptisms (Presbyterians don't ask Christians who come to us from another denomination to get rebaptized.), and we recognize other denominations as equal partners in doing the work of God's kingdom. The church belongs to Jesus Christ and not to Presbyterians or Baptists or Methodists or Pentecostals. Jesus is Lord, and no one else! (Do you recognize that confession?)

We Presbyterians approach any statements about God with humility. Why? Because, at heart, God is a mystery. The mystery of God cannot be explained or wrapped up neatly in a package of words. Indeed, much of our disagreement with fundamentalists is over their tendency to try to make the faith logically airtight and to claim "truth" exclusively as their own.

This book will engage such a closed view of truth and will present a way to express your faith in the light of the Reformed and Presbyterian understanding of God. Our purpose is not to denounce the beliefs of others but to provide for Presbyterians a way to respond to the questions of others that allows all to grow from the experience.

God alone is Lord of the conscience.<sup>9</sup> This is a statement we Presbyterians hold dear. No other authority, no other claim on our conscience, can



be made than our own understanding of God's will for each of us individually. We respect each other's unique relationship with the living God, who gives guidance for our choices and decisions in life. On one level, this is why we Presbyterians can choose to dance, or to smoke, or to drink.<sup>10</sup> God rules your conscience and not anyone else. On another level, this statement is also an affirmation about one's own theological understandings. We believe it is important for all people to share their theological beliefs about God with the church. And the church is made richer for the variety of viewpoints of every person.

The danger, of course, is that we can conclude being Presbyterians means "anything goes." This is far from the truth. Another saying in our tradition is that "truth is in order to goodness."<sup>11</sup> Truth always bears the fruits of holiness, compassion, and justice. We measure all our theological statements on the unique and authoritative witness<sup>12</sup> to God in Jesus Christ. Scripture is our source and guide as we explore theology and the practice of faith. But while there are those who would make a prison of the Bible, we believe it to be liberating and freeing. (See chapter 2 on "scripture" to find out why.)

This book, in its own way, is a theological book, and theology is a community-centered exercise. As we have said: God alone is Lord of the conscience. But this does not mean that our faith is a lonely, individualistic quest. Theology is done best not by individuals but by a community of people: who pledge faithfulness to God; who struggle together to speak the truth as each understands it; and who listen to the truth others speak. This is why we decided to write this book together, as a team. We believe that it will be a better theological book because we do it as coauthors. In our discussions, entailing many times of agreement and also a little bit of argument, we have been mutually enriched, and the book, we are convinced, has been made better by this give and take. Ultimately, two heads are better than one (unless you are in a horror movie), and we would encourage you to discuss some of the ideas of this book with others. The ultimate risk of doing theology is being part of a community where God constantly surprises us with new angles to God's truth.

## GRACE IS THE KEY WORD

You will find through each of the chapters in this book that basically we are describing grace. Grace is radical. It is at the root of all we do and say as Presbyterians. From questions about our salvation, to questions about heaven, to questions about faith and community and mission, grace is the

framework undergirding all our belief. Ultimately, grace is also what creates a different flavor in Presbyterian beliefs and theology from the beliefs and theology of many around us. If you get nothing else out of this book, we hope you will understand just how special the grace of God is in Jesus Christ. As you read along, always remember: Grace is the word!

## WHAT IS GRACE?

At the heart of the Presbyterian understanding of God is one thing: grace! Grace is God's love and acceptance freely given and not earned. Grace is a gift not to people who deserve it or to people because they are particularly special. It is a gift given out of the generosity of God's love for all creation. Grace is boundless and expansive, and, many believe, in the end, irresistible. Grace affirms that it is not humanity that saves itself but God, who has acted in the past, still acts today, and will act tomorrow. Grace is God's gift to undeserving children (regardless of each one's age!).

## So What Do *You* Think?

1. Have you been asked any faith questions by fundamentalist Christians? If so, how did you feel about them? How did you respond to them? Has anyone ever implied that your beliefs were wrong or inferior? How did that feel? What did you do at that time or later?
2. Think about a situation in which you have experienced religious diversity (you were with others who have a different religion or different beliefs). Did this deepen or narrow your appreciation: (a) of them? (b) of life? (c) of your beliefs and identity? (d) of God?
3. Compose a brief creative essay, write a poem or song, or draw a sketch that expresses your experience of "faith born of grace."