



1. Bible

Presbyterians are like we are because Presbyterians are Christians who believe that studying the Bible prayerfully and together helps us figure out which things matter more than other things.

This session will enable participants to consider the way Presbyterians read the Bible through discussion of

- Exodus 34:6
- Isaiah 2:9
- Acts 5:1–21

OPENING PRAYER

*Merciful, gracious, patient, and abundantly loving God,
as we gather to study Scripture and consider its message to us today,
we pray that, by your Spirit, you will be present with us
as we read together,
talk to each other,
listen to each other,
and seek your will for us and our community.
Speak to us and speak through us
so that everything we do in your name
is appropriate in your sight
and consistent with your will for us and for the world.
Amen.*

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There are all sorts of ideas and opinions about the Bible in our congregations, in our communities, and in the larger society. Some folks regard the Bible as an outdated, anti-intellectual set of superstitions that have been used for centuries to justify and rationalize all sorts of colonialism, cruelty, and injustice. Others believe the Bible is the inerrant word of God that must be obeyed without question.

Presbyterians take the Bible seriously. We don't worship the Bible, but we worship the God we meet in the Bible. Our experience as Presbyterians has led us to conclude that the best way to live faithfully with God and with each other is to:

- regularly study Scripture in community (not just by ourselves),
- pray for God's guidance as we do that, and
- listen to each other as we share thoughts and insights.

There can be no doubt that, in the past, Presbyterians and other Christians have misused the Bible. The Bible has been used to defend human slavery, limit the role of women in the church and society, justify the exclusion and devaluing of LGBTQ+ persons, and rationalize other forms of personal and systemic injustice.

Continued, prayerful, and communal study of the Bible has led Presbyterians to change our minds about those matters.

Throughout our history, Presbyterians have especially benefited from insights gained and shared by Christians who were not part of the dominant culture. When we're at our best, Presbyterians attend to the perspectives of fellow Christians who have been overlooked, devalued, and dismissed—often by others who use the Bible to justify and rationalize that unjust behavior.

Presbyterians don't always agree. We don't all emphasize the same passages in the same way. But we keep going back to the Bible to have our discussions about which things matter more than other things. There is value in having a common, authoritative set of texts that give us vocabulary and categories for our conversations about how best to be faithful in changing circumstances.

Think of the Bible as the table around which Presbyterians gather to have our consultations and debates.

- We use some biblical passages **pastorally**, as a source of comforting language to remind and assure us that God loves each of us, all of us, and all creation.
- Sometimes Presbyterians and other Christians use passages **devotionally**. Biblical language and images often guide our individual and corporate responses to God's love. We are led by the Bible to express gratitude to God through worship,

fellowship, and study. Contemplation of Scripture leads us to encourage and exemplify justice, kindness, and humility in our dealings with our neighbors within and beyond the church (see **Micah 6:8** and **Jeremiah 29:7**).

- Presbyterians sometimes read the Bible **historically**. We recognize ourselves as part of the Covenant community described in the Hebrew Scriptures (what Christians have traditionally called the Old Testament). We recognize ourselves as part of the church defined and described in the New Testament. We work hard to study Scripture responsibly. We seek to understand the contexts in which particular texts were written, read, interpreted, and preserved.

In the sixteenth century, John Calvin wrote:

Just as old or bleary-eyed [people] and those with weak vision, if you thrust before them a most beautiful volume, even if they recognize it to be some sort of writing, yet can scarcely construe two words, but with the aid of spectacles will begin to read distinctly; so Scripture, gathering up the otherwise confused knowledge of God in our minds, having dispersed our dullness, clearly shows us the true God.

(John Calvin, Institutes I.vi.1)

When Presbyterians look at the world through the “spectacles” of the Bible, a lot of things come into focus. Presbyterians believe the Bible is the Word of God because our experience has been that, when we study Scripture prayerfully and together, we are addressed from beyond ourselves and guided toward just, inclusive, and loving actions in the world.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- *What do you imagine to be the advantages of reading the Bible together, in community?*
 - *What are the advantages of reading scripture with those who are marginalized?*
 - *What difference does it make to view the Bible as a lens through which the world comes into focus?*
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ENGAGING THE BIBLE

1

By way of introduction, let's look at a couple verses from the Hebrew Scriptures as we move into these Bible Studies.

EXODUS 34:6

The LORD passed before [Moses] and proclaimed,

“The LORD, the LORD,

a God merciful and gracious,

slow to anger,

and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.

This verse is part of the story about Moses going back up the mountain to get a new copy of the Ten Commandments. He smashed the first copy when he saw the golden calf that the Israelites had built to worship while he was up on Mount Sinai (see **Exodus 32:19**). That's not particularly important for us in this context, but notice what God tells Moses when he gets back up the mountain that second time.

A better, more accurate translation of Exodus 34:6 would be:

The LORD passed before [Moses] and proclaimed,

“I AM, I AM,

a God merciful and gracious,

slow to anger,

and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.

Like the passage above, your Bible probably says “the Lord, the Lord” in this verse but God is using the Divine name—“Yahweh”—here.

“I Am” is a better translation (see **Exodus 3:14**).

Read it that way and you'll see that this is a sort of divine self-introduction.

And it's a hugely important verse in the Old Testament. There are six other passages in the Hebrew Scriptures that use this same language to describe God—gracious, merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love: **Nehemiah 9:17, Psalm 86:15, Psalm 103:8, Psalm 145:8, Joel 2:13, and Jonah 4:2.**

Biblical scholars think that's the oldest language in the entire Bible. It's like a creed; a sort definition of who God is. These words were part of the Hebrew oral tradition before any of the texts in our Bible were ever written down.

From as far back as we can know, the Hebrews understood themselves to be uniquely related to a gracious, merciful, patient, and steadfastly loving God.

That means that everybody who ever wrote any of the texts that make up the Bible knew this affirmation of who God is.

In turn, that means that any interpretation of any passage of Scripture that's inconsistent with this understanding of who God is (gracious, merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love) should certainly be questioned and probably rejected.

This ancient understanding of who God is seems somewhat inconsistent with the notion of an angry God who somehow needs to be paid back, satisfied, appeased, pacified, or compensated for human sin.

The people who wrote the Bible knew about history, poetry, literature, and metaphors. They wrote a wide variety of texts as they sought to articulate meaning in a complicated and confusing world in which they maintained faith in their gracious, merciful, patient, and consistently and extravagantly loving God.

The continuity of the Bible—the overarching theme that ties all biblical texts together—is the affirmation that God is always gracious, merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.

Remember that when you study the Bible.

2

Consider **Isaiah 9:6**.

ISAIAH 9:6

**For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders,
and he is named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.**

This verse was written approximately 750 years before the birth of Jesus.

Despite what many earnest and faithful Christians might wish to be true, there is no reason at all to believe that Isaiah was somehow writing about Jesus when he wrote this passage.

He was writing about the birth of King Hezekiah.

Centuries later, when early Christians were searching for language to articulate the meaning of the birth of Jesus, they remembered and appropriately applied Isaiah's language in that new context.

Texts can *mean* something other than what they *meant* when they were originally written.

That's how the Bible works. Scripture gives us language to articulate meaning in new and changing circumstances.

That's why Presbyterians keep going back to the Bible and studying prayerfully together.

Knowing the original context in which a particular text was written is certainly important, but it's not exhaustive. We also need to consider how those texts might help us articulate meaning in new contexts.

3

The story of the Jerusalem Council in **Acts 15** sheds some light on the ways the Bible has always functioned, and continues to function, in the life of the church.

Several features of that story are especially interesting and relevant for contemporary Presbyterians and other Christians.

The story contains disagreement about traditional interpretations of particular passages of Scripture, discussion between people who disagree, minds changed after hearing the stories and insights of others, and resolution of a particular issue by choosing the more inclusive option.

ACTS 15:1

Then certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."

The "certain individuals" represent a faction of former Jews in the early Christian church who thought Christianity was a form of the Jewish faith. They believed people had to become Jews in order to become Christians. Their position was based on 22 passages from the Hebrew Scriptures like **Genesis 17:11** ("You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you."). Based on these passages, "certain individuals" argued that all new members of the fledgling Christian church had to first become Jews and be circumcised.

ACTS 15:2

And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this question with the apostles and the elders.

Paul and Barnabas had been proclaiming the Christian message to non-Jewish people (“Gentiles”) without ever mentioning circumcision (see **Acts 13** and **14**). They had “no small dissension and debate” with the circumcision advocates. The experiences and opinions of Paul and Barnabas were different from those who were maintaining that the traditional standards of membership in the faith community should still apply.

Different experiences of different early Christians led to different interpretations of Scripture and tradition.

This all happened in Antioch, where there was a sizable and growing Christian community. As that congregation realized that they didn’t all agree about the necessity of circumcision for full membership in the church, they decided to send Paul, Barnabas, and “some others” to Jerusalem (the acknowledged “home office” of the church) “to discuss this question with the apostles and the elders.” Recognizing real conflicts about the authority and interpretation of Scripture and tradition, the leaders of multiple congregations in the early church decided to get together and talk about the matters at issue.

QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

- *In what ways is the presence of different experiences and interpretations a strength of Scripture?*
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ACTS 15:3

So they were sent on their way by the church, and as they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, they reported the conversion of the Gentiles and brought great joy to all the brothers and sisters.

The Antioch church entrusted particular individuals to act on its behalf in conversation with representatives of other churches.

Apparently, Christians in Phoenicia and Samaria—“the brothers *and* sisters”—got pretty fired up when Paul, Barnabas, and “some others” told them about non-Jewish people hearing about Jesus and deciding to become Christians.

ACTS 15:4

When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them.

So you've got these folks from Antioch who are very excited about the new and exciting things that are going on in the church among uncircumcised Gentiles who had previously been regarded as ineligible to be part of the faith community.

ACTS 15:5

But some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and said, "It is necessary for them to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses."

There's this other faction who are worried that this new bunch of converts are deviating from established interpretations of Scripture and tradition.

Those Pharisees are not making that up out of thin air. That's what their (and our) Bible said—you have to be circumcised if you want to join the community of faith. The Pharisees are trying to apply a traditional understanding of some specific passages of Scripture in this new and changing context.

Their logic is similar to that used by contemporary Christians who quote **Leviticus 18:22** and **Romans 1:26–27** to argue that LGBTQ+ persons have no place among the people of God. They are endeavoring to apply Scripture passages that had been written in one context to a new situation in the faith community.

ACTS 15:6

The apostles and the elders met together to consider this matter.

In the face of serious disagreement, the leaders of the early church walked *toward* each other. They faced the conflict together. They talked to each other and listened to each other.

That's significant.

ACTS 15:7

After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, “My brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that I should be the one through whom the gentiles would hear the message of the good news and become believers.

See the story of Peter and Cornelius in **Acts 10**.

ACTS 15:8

And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as [God] did to us,

See **Acts 10:45–48** and **Acts 2:1–11**.

ACTS 15:9

and in cleansing their hearts by faith [God] has made no distinction between them and us.

See **Acts 10:34** where Peter says, “I truly understand that God shows no partiality.”

One of the themes of the entire book of Acts is this steady expansion in the early church of the understanding of who can be part of the faith community.

ACTS 15:10

Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear?

“[P]lacing on the neck” refers to a yoke; a common image for intentional lives of faith.

Peter is essentially asking, “Who do we think we are, expecting these new Gentile converts to follow Hebrew law to a greater degree than we or our ancestors have been able to follow it?”

ACTS 15:11

On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.”

Not by uncritically following an ancient set of rules that we’ve been following for a long time.

ACTS 15:12

The whole assembly kept silence and listened to Barnabas and Paul as they told of all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the gentiles.

See **Acts 13** and **14**.

Now, watch what comes next. It's huge.

ACTS 15:13

After they finished speaking, James replied, "My brothers, listen to me.

James was the brother of Jesus and a major figure in the Jerusalem church (see **Acts 12:17** and **21:18**).

ACTS 15:14

Simeon has related how God first looked favorably on the gentiles, to take from among them a people for [God's] name.

When James mentions "Simeon" he's referring to Peter (see **Mathew 16:18**); referring to his stories as well as those of Paul and Barnabas.

This is important because James is acknowledging the relevance and legitimacy of the experiences reported by others in the assembly, even though he has not had similar experiences. He has never personally seen Gentiles receive the Holy Spirit and become Christians.

ACTS 15:15

This agrees with the words of the prophets, as it is written,

James is not arguing that the Scriptures recognized by the entire community are not relevant, he's not denying the validity of the circumcision texts, but he's referring to a different passage than those used by the circumcision party.

ACTS 15:16–18

**'After this I will return,
and I will rebuild the dwelling of David, which has fallen;
from its ruins I will rebuild it,
and I will set it up,
so that all other peoples may seek the Lord—
even all the Gentiles over whom my name has been called.
Thus says the Lord, who has been making these things
known from long ago.'**

James is quoting **Amos 9:11–12**.

As he participates in the conversation with other church leaders about whether or not Gentiles who convert to Christianity must be circumcised, James doesn't quit looking to the Bible for language to interpret the things that he and others in the church are experiencing, but he finds language in a different passage (other than those enjoining circumcision) that helps him interpret the stories and experiences that have been recounted by Peter, Paul, and Barnabas.

ACTS 15:19

“Therefore, I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those gentiles who are turning to God,

After hearing the stories of others (Peter, Paul, and Barnabas), and thinking about the whole Bible, James *changes his mind*.

He begins to think about Scripture and tradition in a new way and comes to a different position about circumcision than he had held before.

ACTS 15:20

but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from sexual immorality and from whatever has been strangled and from blood.

Even as he comes to the conclusion in verse 19 that “we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God,” James doesn't propose eliminating all standards for membership in the community.

In other words, just because we have concluded that one traditionally-understood restriction on membership in the community of faith (circumcision) is no longer relevant, that does not mean that we should eliminate all notions and rules about who belongs in the faith community and how they should behave.

ACTS 15:21

For in every city, for generations past, Moses has had those who proclaim him, for he has been read aloud every Sabbath in the synagogues.”

James is essentially saying that the other traditional rules and restrictions about participation in the community remain relevant because they continue to contribute to the health of the community and its members. But his conclusion based on the stories and experiences of Peter, Paul, and Silas is that the requirement that all members must be circumcised is no longer relevant.

CONCLUSION

This is how the Bible works in the church.

As was mentioned above, there was once a time when Presbyterians and other Christians used the Bible to defend human slavery, to limit the role of women in the church, and justify the exclusion and devaluing of LGBTQ+ persons. Continued and prayerful study of the Bible together has led Presbyterians to change our minds about those matters.

The Bible hasn't changed. But the church's understanding of the witness of Scripture as a whole certainly has.

That's what happened in **Acts 15**. Leaders from a variety of congregations got together, talked and listened to each other, and then made a decision.

Some of them changed their minds.

Presbyterians believe the Bible remains relevant for our life together. We sometimes have experiences that lead us to new understandings and interpretations of particular parts of the Bible. We think our best shot at discerning the leadership of the Holy Spirit comes when we prayerfully study the whole Bible, deliberate, and act together. When we do that, the Holy Spirit consistently leads us to more inclusive ways of understanding and articulating the scope of God's love.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- *Why do you think members of the faith community thought the story of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 was so important that it needed to be written down and preserved?*
- *What guidance might we draw from this story for addressing disagreements within or beyond the church?*

BEST PRACTICES FOR PRESBYTERIAN BIBLE STUDY

- *What best practice for Presbyterian Bible Study can you articulate from this study and discussion?*
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