



Every Living Creature

AUTHENTIC CHRISTIAN FAITH
IN A MULTI-FAITH WORLD

WRITTEN BY

REV. JOHN WILLIAMS, PH.D.

Chaplain and Director of Church Relations
Austin College • Sherman, Texas

PREPARED BY THE

OFFICE OF CHRISTIAN FORMATION

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Written by Rev. John Williams, Ph.D.
Chaplain and Director of Church Relations
Austin College, Sherman, Texas

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Introduction

This resource is intended to help Presbyterian individuals and congregations think and talk about how we can live out our Christian faith in a diverse world.

It can be used for individual reflection, conversations among Christian formation leaders, or in educational settings within congregations.



According to a 2021 Pew Research Institute survey:

- 64% of Americans identify as Christian,
- 30% as religiously unaffiliated, and
- 6% as members of other religions.

As Americans, we know very well that there is not unanimity among the 64% of our fellow Americans who identify as Christian. Despite our common Christian faith, we don't all agree about the most appropriate ways for Christians to participate in our society and relate to our neighbors.

And most of us are fully aware that a significant number of our neighbors do not share our Christian faith.

Those survey numbers raise relevant and important questions for Presbyterians as we think about and relate to others (our neighbors) who have different faiths or no faith.

Being American Presbyterians in the twenty-first century involves thinking together about how we can articulate and live out authentic Christian faith in our diverse world.

Before engaging the material below, it will be beneficial to think about the following questions:

- *Do you have personal relationships with people who are not Christian?*

- *Do you believe God loves those people?*
- *Do you believe they will all go to hell when they die unless they become Christians before then?*
- *Should our only relationship with people outside the church involve trying to convince them all to become Christians like us?*
- *If not, how can we understand what it means to be faithful Christians in a diverse world?*
- *How can we think about faithfully relating to non-Christians?*

The following is intended to invite and facilitate conversations among Presbyterians—individual members, congregational leaders, and congregations in general—about authentic Christian faith in a multifaith world.



**Every
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Genesis 9:9–16

The first covenant mentioned in the Bible comes when God is talking to Noah after the Great Flood.

In **Genesis 9:9–16**, God tells Noah:

⁹ **“As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you**

¹⁰ **and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark.**

¹¹ **I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.”**

¹² **God said, “This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations:**

¹³ **I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.**

¹⁴ **When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds,**

¹⁵ **I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh, and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh.**

¹⁶ **When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.” (NRSV)**

Note the repetition of the phrase “every living creature” in this passage.

According to the Bible, God’s earliest and oldest covenant is with “every living creature.”

No exceptions.

That certainly includes every Christian.

But there’s nothing in this passage that suggests Christians are the only ones God cares about.

“Authentic Christian Faith”

Christian exclusivism is the notion that only Christians have correct and authentic relationship with God.

Over the centuries and into the present day, many earnest and sincere Christians (including Presbyterians) have assumed that some religions are “right” and others are “wrong.” Most of us are aware of people who believe that God’s attitude toward individuals and communities depends largely on how they choose to worship, serve, and talk about God. For many among us, the notion that God loves people from other religions is a source of confusion and anxiety.

Many Christians adopt a sort of “zero sum” attitude toward religion.

“Either we’re right or they are—it can’t be both.”

There are certainly places in the Bible that suggest that God’s love is limited to certain communities. The books of **Ezra** and **Nehemiah** strongly suggest that the people of Israel, the heirs to God’s Covenant with Abraham, are superior and closer to God than other communities with different religions (see for example **Ezra 9:1–4** and **Nehemiah 13:23–25**).

There are verses in the New Testament, especially in the Gospel of John, that suggest that only Christians authentically know God.

John 3:16 says

**For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son,
so that everyone who believes in him
may not perish but may have eternal life.** (NRSV)

John 14:6, Jesus says

**“I am the way and the truth and the life.
No one comes to the Father except through me.”** (NRSV)



The fact that many of the documents in the PC(USA) *Book of Confessions* deal with questions of exclusivism demonstrates that these have been relevant issues in the life of Presbyterians for centuries.

Building on biblical passages like those mentioned above, the confessions contain multiple expressions of Christian exclusivism.

The **Scots Confession** of 1560 says,

Outside the Church, there is neither life nor eternal felicity.

Therefore **we utterly abhor the blasphemy of those who hold that men who live according to equity and justice shall be saved, no matter what religion they profess.**

For since **there is neither life nor salvation without Christ Jesus**; so shall none have part therein but those whom the Father has given unto his Son Christ Jesus, and those who in time come to him, avow his doctrine, and believe in him. (*Book of Confessions* 3.16)

There are similar statements of Christian exclusivism elsewhere in the **Scots Confession** (3.17) and in the **Heidelberg Catechism** (4.020, 4.071), the **Second Helvetic Confession** (5.019, 5.077, 5.136, 5.140), and the **Westminster Confession of Faith and Larger and Shorter Catechisms** (6.056, 6.067).

Throughout the history of the Church and into the present day, many (probably most) Christians have thought of persons outside the Church in terms of Christian exclusivism, believing essentially that we're right, they're wrong—end of story.

“In a Multifaith World”

The Bible and the PC(USA) *Book of Confessions* also include additional stories and ideas that Presbyterians should take seriously as we think and pray together about how to live faithfully and lovingly in the diverse world where we woke up this morning.

Matthew 20:1–16

Matthew begins the parable of the laborers in the vineyard (**Matthew 20:1–16**), by telling his readers that Jesus told this story *as he was telling [the disciples] what the kingdom of heaven would be like* (Matthew 20:1, CEV).

Jesus is talking about heaven as he tells this story.

- A guy goes out early one morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.
- He hires some workers, agrees to pay them the “usual daily wage” and sends them off into the vineyard.
- He comes back later in the morning, sees more people standing around looking for work, hires them, agrees to pay them the “usual daily wage,” and sends them off to work in his vineyard.
- This happens again at about 3:00 and about 5:00 the same day.
- Then in the evening, the landowner tells his manager go to settle up with the workers and give them their pay.
- All the laborers are gathered together now, and the manager first pays the one hired at 5pm. And they get a whole day’s pay!
- Matthew tells us that, when they saw that, the ones hired at dawn were expecting to get more. But they didn’t. They got the same pay as those hired at 5:00.
- And they complain to the owner.
- In verse 12, they say

**The ones who were hired last worked only one hour.
But you paid them the same that you did us.
And we worked in the hot sun all day long. (CEV)**

We need to remember that this is a parable about heaven as we consider the owner’s response in verse 13:

¹³ **“Friend, I didn’t cheat you. I paid you exactly what we agreed on.**

¹⁴ **Take your money now and go! What business is it of yours if I want to pay them the same that I paid you?**

¹⁵ **Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Why should you be jealous, if I want to be generous?”** (CEV)

“Why should you be jealous, if I want to be generous?”

That’s an interesting question for a parable about heaven.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- *Which workers do you identify with in this story?*
 - *As you think about heaven and who else might be there, do you feel more like a worker hired at dawn, or like one of the ones who were hired late in the day? Why?*
 - *How might the landowner’s question to the workers hired at sunrise (“Why should you be jealous, if I want to be generous?”) be relevant for our current conversation about the relationship between Presbyterians and our neighbors who profess different religions or no religion?*
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Jonah 4:1–11

The landowner's comments in Matthew 20:15 are reminiscent of a conversation between God and Jonah in the fourth chapter of the Book of Jonah.

Forget the big fish, the primary lesson of the Book of Jonah is that it was wrong for Jonah to be mad when God decided not to destroy the Ninevites.

Remember—

- God calls Jonah and tells him to go preach in Nineveh.
- Jonah doesn't want to go preach to a bunch of infidel foreigners so he hops a boat and tries to run away.
- God sends a storm.
- Jonah gets thrown overboard.
- He gets saved by the big fish and deposited back on dry ground.
- God calls him again go to Nineveh.
- This time, Jonah—who still probably smells like fish guts—decides he should probably go.
- So he goes to Nineveh and starts preaching to the infidel foreigners.
- And it works.
- The Ninevites say, “Oh snap! We'd better straighten up and fly right.”
- God hears their repentance and decides to spare them.
- And that makes Jonah mad.
- Jonah is mad that God is nice to the Ninevites.
- Jonah goes traipsing up a hill hoping that God will destroy the Ninevites after all.
- It's hot.

- God sends a vine to grow up over Jonah to give him shade as he watches.
- Jonah likes that—when God does something that brings him comfort.
- Then God sends a worm to destroy the vine and Jonah pitches a fit and whines to God because the shady vine is gone.
- And then, in **Jonah 4:10–11** God says:

¹⁰ **You are concerned about a vine that you did not plant or take care of, a vine that grew up in one night and died the next.**

¹¹ **In that city of Nineveh there are more than 120,000 people who cannot tell right from wrong, and many cattle are also there.**

Don't you think I should be concerned about that big city? (CEV)

God's question to Jonah ("Don't you think I should be concerned about that big city?") sounds like the landowner's question in Matthew 20 ("Why should you be jealous, if I want to be generous?").

The lesson of both of these biblical stories is that God's mercy and concern are not limited to people that the workers hired at dawn, or Jonah, or maybe even we like or approve of.

God loves who God loves.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- *How does consideration of Matthew 20:1–16 and Jonah 4:1–11 inform your ideas about salvation and religious diversity?*
 - *What do we learn about God and ourselves from these stories?*
 - *How might these conversations about religious diversity affect the relationships your congregation builds with other faith communities?*
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Psalm 139:1–8

Consider the beautiful, profound, and reassuring words of **Psalm 139:1–8**.

- ¹ **You have looked deep into my heart, Lord, and you know all about me.**
² **You know when I am resting or when I am working,
and from heaven you discover my thoughts.**
³ **You notice everything I do and everywhere I go.**
⁴ **Before I even speak a word, you know what I will say,
⁵ and with your powerful arm you protect me from every side. (CEV)**

That psalm was written long before there were any Presbyterians, but Presbyterians believe that what's true for the psalmist is also true for each of us.

⁶ **I can't understand all of this! Such wonderful knowledge is far above me. (CEV)**

This is a psalm about the complete, sufficient, and dependable love of God. And there's nothing here that suggests that there are any limits to that love.

- ⁷ **Where could I go to escape from your Spirit or from your sight?
⁸ If I were to climb up to the highest heavens, you would be there.
If I were to dig down to the world of the dead you would also be there. (CEV)**

According to Psalm 139, wherever we are—before or after we die—we will never be anywhere where God isn't.

We will never ever be beyond the reach of God's love.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- *Is there anything in the text of Psalm 139 that suggests that God doesn't notice and protect everybody in the way described there?*
 - *How does that recognition affect the way you—and your congregation—should think about your non-Christian neighbors?*
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Study of the entire Bible in an increasingly diverse context has led Presbyterians to hesitate to speak definitively, on God's behalf, about what God thinks about people who are not Christians.

Although, as was discussed above, many of the documents in the PC(USA) *Book of Confessions* contain statements of Christian exclusivism, there are also statements that point beyond exclusivism.

The Heidelberg Catechism (1563) says

God wants us to **love our neighbors as ourselves**, to be **patient, peace-loving, gentle, merciful, and friendly toward them**, to **protect them from harm as much as we can**, and to **do good even to our enemies**. (BC 4.107)

The Second Helvetic Confession (1566) says

although God knows who are [God's], and here and there mention is made of the small number of elect, yet **we must hope well of all, and not rashly judge any [person] to be a reprobate**. (BC 5.055)

and

when the Lord was asked whether there were few that should be saved, he does not answer and tell them that few or many should be saved or damned, but rather he exhorts every man to "strive to enter by the narrow door" (Luke 13:24): as if he should say, **It is not for you curiously to inquire about these matters**, but rather to endeavor that you may enter into heaven by the straight way. (BC 5.056)

and

For we know that **God had some friends in the world outside the commonwealth of Israel**. (BC 5.137)

The Confession of 1967 notes that

The Christian finds parallels between other religions and his own and **must approach all religions with openness and respect**. Repeatedly God has used the insight of non-Christians to challenge the church to renewal. But the reconciling word of the gospel is God's judgment upon all forms of religion, including the Christian. The gift of God in Christ is for all men. The church, therefore, is commissioned to carry the gospel to all men whatever their religion may be and even when they profess none. (BC 9.42)

The **Form of Government** in the PC(USA) *Book of Order* affirms that

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) at all levels seeks new opportunities for conversation and understanding with non-Christian religious entities. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) at all levels will be open to and will seek **opportunities for respectful dialogue and mutual relationships with entities and persons from other religious traditions**. It does this in the faith that the church of Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit, is sign and means of God's intention for the wholeness of all human-kind and all creation. (G-5.0102)

Presbyterians have been thinking for centuries about how to understand and live out our Christian faith in a diverse world. We continue to be guided by our Confessions as we study and interpret scripture.

Conclusion

In the Doubting Thomas story (**John 20:19–31**)

- the risen Christ has appears to ten of his disciples on Easter night (v. 19)
- twice, he tells them “Peace be with you.” (vv. 19, 21)
- Then Thomas, who hadn’t been there when Jesus first appeared, shows up in verse 24.

Then:

²⁵ . . . **the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord!”**

But he said to them, “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.” (NRSV)

Thomas is clearly not buying the whole “hanging out on Sunday with the guy we all watched die on Friday” resurrection story.

But note how verse 26 begins.

²⁶ **A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them.**

Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” (NRSV)

It is easy to miss the important fact that, for an entire week, there was not unanimity among the disciples about whether or not Jesus Christ had been raised from the dead.

They didn’t agree about that fundamental theological point.

But **they stayed together anyway.**

Thomas had not left, even though he thought his friends had given in to pure wishful thinking.

And the other ten had not kicked Thomas out, even though he didn’t believe the same thing they did about the resurrection of Christ.

The “peace of Christ” mentioned earlier in the story is evident in the fact that all eleven disciples had stayed together even though they didn’t agree.

They understood that it was ultimately **more important to be loving than to be right.**

QUESTION FOR REFLECTION

- *How might the disciples' recognition that it's more important to be loving than to be right be relevant to our current conversations about authentic faith in a multi-faith context?*
-

Micah 6:8 says:

**[God] has told you, O mortal, what is good,
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice and to love kindness
and to walk *humbly* with your God? (NRSV)**

As we consider how to live out authentic Christian faith in a multifaith context, Presbyterians will do well to follow the guidance of Micah 6:8 and “walk humbly with God.”

“Walking *humbly* with God” could mean

- Letting God be God.
- Trying not to be jealous because God is generous.
- Remembering God’s promise to notice, accompany, and protect **every living creature**.

Perhaps we shouldn’t spend much time worrying about who’s in and who’s out.

God can handle that.

When we’re at our best, Presbyterians endeavor to speak confidently, faithfully, hospitably, and humbly about God.

We believe the scope of God’s love is bigger and more extensive than we will ever be able to completely articulate or explain.

We believe we will do well to spend our time and energy seeking to be instruments of God’s gracious, merciful, patient, and abundant love whenever, wherever, and for whom-ever we can.

QUESTION FOR REFLECTION

- *What are other ways that the image of “walking humbly with God” can be useful as you and your congregation think about articulating authentic faith in a multifaith context?*
-



Summarizing Questions for Reflection

- *Why do you think Presbyterians and other Christians through the centuries have advocated Christian exclusivism?*
- *Do you think it is important for Christians to declare and teach that “there is neither life nor salvation without Jesus Christ”?*
Why or why not?
- *Has meeting and personally knowing people who are not Christian affected the way you think about salvation, heaven, and religious pluralism?*
In what ways?
- *Are there particular biblical stories, ideas, or concepts in this study that you have found particularly interesting or intriguing?*
Which one(s)?
Why?



For Further Reading

About Three-in-Ten U.S. Adults Are Now Religiously Unaffiliated

by the Pew Research Center

The Wide, Wide Circle of Divine Love: A Biblical Case for Religious Diversity,

by W. Eugene March

A Multitude of Blessings: A Christian Approach to Religious Diversity,

by Cynthia M. Campbell

Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived,

by Rob Bell

You Don't Have to Be Wrong for Me to Be Right: Finding Faith Without Fanaticism,

by Brad Hirschfield

Book of Confessions, The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A), Part I

Book of Order, The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Part II

Why Presbyterians are Like That, a 10-session Bible study written by the author of *Every Living Creature* speaking specifically to Presbyterian distinctiveness within Christian Communities.

"Religious Pluralism: Learning to Embrace the Abundance of Our Multifaith World," *The Presbyterian Outlook*, September 2023.