

# C O N V E R S A T I O N S

## Our “Presbyterian Virtues”

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My purpose is to share with you—reverently and expectantly—insights gleaned over a period of fifty years regarding several interrelated marks and gifts found in our Presbyterian/Reformed heritage, discipleship, teachings, and DNA. I have discovered that as Presbyterians think and talk about “God, Persons, Church, and World,” we do so through several signposts of strength and vision that help define our callings and identities as a people.

I like to refer to these strengths and hallmarks as our “Presbyterian virtues.” I suggest this framework due to an article I stumbled on by Daniel Jenkins, a British theologian who used to teach at Princeton Theological Seminary. His article is titled “Marianne Moore: A Presbyterian Poet?”<sup>1</sup> Moore’s brother was a Presbyterian minister, and she was for years a faithful member of the Lafayette Avenue Presbyterian Church in Brooklyn. Jenkins suggests that Moore’s remarkable poetry exemplifies the following Presbyterian virtues: the life of the mind; enjoyment of the natural creation; humility and self-criticism arising out of the awareness of justification by faith alone; love of the simple life contrasted with a life colored by pomposity, egocentrism, ostentation, and “highbrowism;” a deep sense of awe before God and the mysteries of the faith; and a strong awareness of our public responsibility.<sup>2</sup>

Across the years, I have been fond of saying that at our best we “Presbyterians are thinking people with warm hearts”—as this wonderful poem by Marianne Moore illustrates:

Fragments of sin are a part of me,  
New brooms shall sweep clean the heart of me.  
    Shall they? Shall they?  
When this light life shall have passed away,  
God shall redeem me, a castaway.  
    Shall He? Shall He?<sup>3</sup>

Now, please abide with me as I lift up these and a few other Presbyterian virtues. I want to present our virtues by using a helpful palate, organized under four categories: how we think and talk about 1) God, 2) Persons, 3) Church, and 4) World.

## 1. In Pondering God, These Presbyterian Virtues Emerge

I begin with a virtue that is at the forefront of our Presbyterian heritage: the sovereignty of God. On the one hand, we understand this sovereignty as being majestic and awesome. On the other hand, it is personal and intimate.

“Why is there something instead of nothing?” A renowned twentieth-century theologian, Paul Tillich, was mesmerized by this question as a boy.<sup>4</sup> There are three major answers to this question, one of the most crucial questions we will ever ask.

The atheist’s answer? Lord Bertrand Russell’s is classic:

We see, surrounding the narrow raft illumined by the flickering light of human comradeship, the dark ocean on whose rolling waves we toss for a brief hour; from the great night without, a chill blast breaks in upon our refuge; all the loneliness of humanity amid hostile forces is concentrated upon the individual soul, which must struggle alone, with what of courage it can command, against the whole weight of a universe that cares nothing for its hopes and fears.<sup>5</sup>

The agnostic’s answer is less jolting, yet it is still wanting: “I don’t know. I don’t know why there is something instead of nothing.”

And the Christian response? “God.” “God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.” This world did not happen by chance, we confess. Rather, it is the magnificent and throbbing creation of a providing, ordering, and caring Mind and Spirit. We believe, as someone has said, that the universe “suddenly exploded some 15 billion years ago in a flash of light and energy. The abrupt emergence of a world out of nothingness with a big bang bears an uncanny resemblance to the Genesis command: *Fiat lux* [‘Let there be light’].”<sup>6</sup>

Thus, in our worship, teaching, and preaching, Presbyterians choose and are chosen to profess the providence, priority, splendor, majesty, and sovereignty of God. Here, “sovereignty” basically means “rule.” However unfathomably, God rules or governs not as a divine puppeteer but by choosing to care for this world and our lives in orderly ways. Thus God blesses us with seasons, gravity, and the balancing of opposites such as work and rest, day and night, having and not having, laughter and crying. For better and for worse, God even chooses to rule partly through the personal freedom and stewardship of us human beings.

Yes, we teach and profess God’s **personal** sovereignty. Thus, we readily resonate with this testimony from Charles Townes, a renowned Nobel physicist: “As a religious person, I strongly sense . . . the presence and actions of a creative being far beyond myself and yet always personal and close by.”<sup>7</sup> Therefore, as Presbyterians emphasize God’s sovereignty, we profess that God chooses to rule this world in special accordance with God’s own character, which is love. Here, our infinite God reveals to us who God is in ways that finite humans can understand.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, John 3:16 is at the heart and soul of God’s very personal sovereignty. “For God so loved the world,” God gave God’s own self. Because of this, we believe that Jesus Christ is

incomparably the most significant event in the history of our human species. In Jesus—who is God’s own heart of flesh, the God-life on earth—our sovereign Creator becomes the incarnate One who accommodates himself to us by becoming one of us: by crawling into the cradle of Bethlehem, climbing onto the cross of Golgotha, and breaking out of and defeating the annihilating abyss of evil and death. Indeed, we believe that God’s sovereign rule is made known to us preeminently in the resurrection victory of Jesus; that Jesus is the risen Lord and Savior of all times and all places; and that to know God now in Jesus Christ is to know God forever.

## **2. In Pondering Persons, These Presbyterian Virtues Emerge**

As I study and lift up our Presbyterian virtues, I would suggest that perhaps our most significant gift to the world is our remarkably realistic doctrine of human nature. We understand the complex human picture probably as well as any religious group. As Reinhold Niebuhr has taught us, “the mystery of human selfhood is only a degree beneath the mystery of God.”<sup>9</sup> On the one hand, said Niebuhr, human beings possess indeterminate capacities for creativity. There is something in the human psyche, a curious element within the human spirit, a flickering candle within the sacred mystery called the person that prompts and inspires us to look for significance, worth, and goodness in our lives. There is something in your ruggedly hopeful constitution, something in your vulnerable yet venerable personhood, that can cause you to know in preciously simple and clear terms that your very life contains ultimate importance, profound meaning, and God-given orientation. This claim is at the core of our biblical faith: our lives amount to something good. We have our better angels. We have been born in the image of God. God breathes in us. We are souls. That is, we are persons. We are tinged by the holy. We are touched by the divine.

On the other hand, we human beings also possess indeterminate possibilities for sinfulness and destruction. We are fallen creatures who have our lesser angels, and we also have thoughts that could “shame the fire out of hell.”<sup>10</sup> The real, nonimaginary, living, and lethal powers of sin and evil creep in as we try to live without reference to God. Sin overpowers us as we flee from God and reject God through our pride, idolatry, indifference, unbelief, rebellion, and disobedience. Sin is like a parasite that infiltrates our lives and attaches itself to us. Thus, as one teacher describes, “once human beings sinned, sin became the heritage of the whole human race and a part of the structure of human society.”<sup>11</sup>

Precisely because we deeply realize that we are both creative creatures and self-centered destroyers, Presbyterians have wielded a definite impact on American leadership and governmental structures, the development of the U. S. Constitution, and our ingrained systems for checking and balancing power. Since individuals and groups are both creative and destructive, we enable their creativity, and we check and balance their power.

So it is that we, all of us, must finally be saved by the amazing grace of Christ and justified by faith alone. This pertinent jingle describes well our human situation:

There is so much good in the worst of us,  
And so much bad in the best of us,  
That it hardly becomes any of us

To talk about the rest of us.<sup>12</sup>

Ethicist Donald Shriver advises that we must envision ourselves as “a company of forgiven forgivers.”<sup>13</sup> Politically and personally, we need one another’s criticism and patience. As Robert Frost once explained,

If one by one we counted people out  
For the least sin, it wouldn’t take us long  
To get so we had no one left to live with.  
For to be social is to be forgiving.<sup>14</sup>

Let me conclude this section by briefly mentioning two additional Presbyterian virtues strongly relating to persons. Because of our twofold nature, as both creative and sinful persons, Presbyterians have historically stressed the art of disciplined obedience to God in our daily lives. No two virtues contribute more to our disciplined obedience than do our love of a healthy work ethic and our advocacy of a simple life. As a seminary teacher once advised, “Meaningful work, freely chosen, is a privilege to be enjoyed and not a burden to be endured.” We sincerely believe that God calls us as moral persons to personal discipline that is willing to forgo immediate gratification for the possibility of a future good and to a simplicity of lifestyle that stands reverently and humbly over against a more pompous style of being. “Simplicity,” said my teacher, “is very close to sincerity. It clears away the ornaments, the ostentations, the contrivances, the pretenses that obscure the real.”<sup>15</sup>

### **3. In Pondering the Church, These Presbyterian Virtues Emerge**

Step inside a Presbyterian church, and you often meet disciplined and winsome folks who are “thinking people with warm hearts,” people who believe, as someone has affirmed, that “next to the life of love, the most beautiful thing is a human mind dedicated to the glory of God.”<sup>16</sup>

For people living in the United States it is significant to remember that from 1800 to 1830 American Protestantism built our basic institutions, which were our Sunday schools, our boards and agencies, and our colleges and seminaries. In 1830, we had eighteen seminaries. Eight were Presbyterian, and fourteen were Calvinist in orientation. Why and how? Robert Lynn says that we were able to do these things because we had a passionate vision regarding the life of the mind and a vision for quality and equality. James Sanders, an eminent biblical theologian, explains that Presbyterians have always had “a peculiar burden to theologize.”<sup>17</sup> That is to say, we feel historically called to live and love as biblical/theological sensemakers—to make sense out of life through the trustworthy eyeglasses of Bible and theology. With Reinhold Niebuhr, we believe that biblical faith “makes more sense out of more facts”—allowing always for a wholesome sense of mystery—than all the other alternatives.<sup>18</sup> We believe in the indispensable importance of Christian education. We believe in the stewardship of our minds in every generation, as faith seeks understanding. We believe that God is not pleased if and when religion contends that the mind is unimportant. To be sure, we love God with our minds as we also do with our hearts. We believe that God wants us to know what we believe because our Creator gives us our minds and longs for us to study diligently in order to pass on the teachings of Jesus and the stories of Israel.

So it is that *The Coventry Cathedral Booklet on Evensong* proclaims to us, “You are coming in on a conversation which began long before you were born and will continue long after you are dead.”<sup>19</sup> This historically nurturing biblical conversation, we believe, is God’s own self-authenticating word that finds, feeds, and reads us with great power. An East-African woman once lifted a Bible high over her head and made this announcement to her village: “Yes, of course there are many books which I could read. But there is only one book which reads me.”<sup>20</sup> Her confession was that the Bible is a divine/human window revealing God’s search for us and our search for God. The Bible is an extraordinary lens by which the Holy Spirit helps us find our way through the fog of daily decisions, responsibilities, challenges, and pain. The Bible is that larger story to which our own stories are connected. Enter into the Bible’s words, make them your own, and you will strangely enter a door that is the word of God. No, the Bible is not a museum, says Robert McAfee Brown. Rather, it is a drama in which, by God’s grace, we are included. Thus, when the prophet Amos thunders at the people of Bethel, he is also thundering at us today. When Jesus asks Peter, “Who do you say that I am?” he is also asking us today, “Who do you say that I am?”<sup>21</sup>

I must not conclude these observations about the church without applauding two remarkable and intertwining Presbyterian virtues and contributions to both church and society. First, we are among the most publicly and demonstrably democratic denominations on earth. Presbyterians traditionally insist on group decision making. In our church, no one person is given the green light to act unilaterally, for we are convinced that too much power corrupts people, and we believe that power should be checked and balanced. We doggedly affirm that, by and large and generally speaking, groups make more trustworthy decisions than individuals. This is what I like to call our institutionalization of self-criticism. We get this vision greatly from John Calvin, the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformer. As someone has said, “Calvin imagined a church where authority was not in its hierarchy but its people.” His vision was revolutionary then, and it still is today. We all have the right, said Calvin, to participate in the process by which authority is exercised—both in the church and in the social order.<sup>22</sup>

The word *process* leads us to a related virtue. As children of the Protestant Reformation, we see ourselves as pilgrims on an ongoing journey. Moreover, as my prophetic friend and foremother Nelle Morton used to remind us, the journey itself is our actual home. “Home is a movement,” she instructed us.<sup>23</sup> Nelle was proclaiming the ongoing nature of reformation. That is, reformation is a process, a continual action. It is not so much an accomplished goal as it is an active and dynamic prophetic encounter, movement, and passion for present and future reform whereby we and our groups and institutions are “reformed and always being reformed.” This expectant and ongoing pilgrimage of self-criticism provides a humble and persistent counterbalance to our temptations and inclinations toward religious and secular arrogance and our potential abuses of power and authority.

#### **4. In Pondering the World, These Presbyterian Virtues Emerge**

Our starting place is John 3:16, the biblical heart and soul of the church’s life on earth: “For God so loved the **world**. . . .” Thus, we remember one of Calvin’s favorite phrases: “The world as the theater of God’s glory.” Thus, we remember these words, prophesied by Lord George

MacLeod, that served as a clarion call for both the Iona Community in Scotland and the East Harlem Protestant Parish in Manhattan:

I simply argue that the Cross be raised again at the center of the marketplace as well as on the steeple of the Church. I am recovering the claim that Jesus was not crucified in a Cathedral between two Candles, but on a Cross between two thieves; on the town garbage heap; at a crossroads so cosmopolitan that they had to write his title in Hebrew and in Latin and in Greek . . . ; at the kind of place where cynics talk smut, and thieves curse, and soldiers gamble. Because that is where he died and that is what he died about. And that is where church [people] should be and what church [people] should be about.<sup>24</sup>

Thus, throughout his pastoral/prophetic/institutional pilgrimage, Don Shriver has thanked God for the abiding influence of the German martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who taught him “a new way of living in the presence of God—solidly in the world, in the suffering of one’s neighbors.”<sup>25</sup> Surely, we as a people are moved vocationally by Fred Craddock’s reflection on a story by Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish theologian. Kierkegaard pictures a small child who cheerfully leads a band of blind violinists along a busy Amsterdam street. They are playing beautifully for coins that will provide their food and shelter. But the blind musicians are surrounded and appreciated by a crowd of poor people—folks who can provide no food. And passing by the violinists on the outskirts of the picture are the members of the noble class who are blind to their needs. But who will serve these poor musicians? Kierkegaard asks. Those who would cannot. Those who should will not.

Yes, with the world as our God-ordained context for ministry, we cling to these haunting words from Hugh Thomson Kerr’s great hymn: “When we are strong, Lord, leave us not alone.”<sup>26</sup> As one of my minister predecessors at Pasadena Presbyterian used to remind the congregation, “O love that will not let us go; O love that will not let us down; O love that will not let us off,”<sup>27</sup> meaning “off the hook”—the righteous hook of deep compassion and utmost neighborliness. Why in the world? Because God so loves the world, God gives God’s own self.

Yes we (the church in and not out of the world) cling to the holy dream of Alfred, Lord Tennyson that “not one soul should be destroyed or cast as rubbish in the void.”<sup>28</sup> We who are loved by God are empowered by the Holy Spirit to live and serve as lovers of God. Justified by grace through faith, we are also empowered by the Spirit to live justly and with mercy in our hearts. And in loving Jesus, God’s own heart of flesh, we open ourselves, in the words of Diogenes Allen, to the possibility of becoming more “like what we love.” Allen says, “To have faith is to believe that a love of justice brings us nearer to it.”<sup>29</sup> This biblical virtue affirms that Jesus identifies mercifully with every victim of injustice and that we are called to despise injustice as Jesus despises injustice.

With the world as our vocational arena, Presbyterian congregations are historically and unapologetically committed to the relevance of biblical faith in both church and society. With the great twentieth-century Reformed theologian Karl Barth, we urge our ministers to prepare and preach sermons with the Bible in one hand and the daily newspaper in the other. We yearn to relate Sunday to Monday, to work for the virtue of transformation in the social order, to replace

otherworldly escapism with “worldly responsibilities,” and to pray expectantly with our Savior, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”<sup>30</sup>

As a “priesthood of all believers,” a “communion of saints,” and an interdependent community of moral discourse and action, we have received an “ethics of character”<sup>31</sup> from our faithful forebears and mentors that we yearn to pass on to our children. And we also expectantly long for our children and their children to pass on this and other cherished Presbyterian virtues that relate so profoundly and relevantly to “God, Persons, Church, and World.”



Please let me reverently dramatize our interdependent need and calling to pass on these virtuous gifts we have received while standing on the strong shoulders of the wonderful saints and sinners who have gone before us. I share perhaps the most powerful speech I have ever heard in person. Prophetic and life shaping, it was given by Maya Angelou at Occidental College, Los Angeles, June 14, 1992, at our son Nathan’s graduation.

First, Angelou asked the graduating class, “How did you get here today?” Then she said, “I’ll tell you how you got here. Lots of folks paid for you to get here. Lots of folks, way before you were born and way before you came of age, paid for you to get here.”

Then Angelou told us about her own forebears. She told us about the African slaves in the wretched slave galleys, shackled in chains and huddled tortuously in those horrible prisons. They paid for her to get here, she testified.

She then told us about “Miss Culture Lady” in her girlhood church in Stamps, Arkansas. She also told us about an old dignified literary woman in Stamps who had invited her to her house for tea and about how that old woman had planted seeds of literary hope in young Maya’s heart. Because there, at tea, she had introduced little Maya to Charles Dickens and *A Tale of Two Cities*.

“All those people paid for me to get here today,” she testified: the slaves, Miss Culture Lady, and the old literary woman at tea, reading Charles Dickens.

With mystical and prophetic eyes ablaze, Angelou dramatically gazed and pointed beyond her spellbound Occidental College audience as if she were looking out upon the mystery of life, both presently and way into the future. She then roared to the graduating class, in an absolutely electrifying manner, these following words about the essence of our potential human service, stewardship, leadership, dignity, duty, and virtues: “Get on out of here today! Get on out of here! Get on out of here! And with your very life, pay for somebody else to get here years down the line!”<sup>32</sup>

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Daniel Jenkins, “Marianne Moore: A Presbyterian Poet?” *Theology Today* 41 (July 1984): 34–41.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, 35–36.

<sup>3</sup>Marianne Moore, “Appellate Jurisdiction.”

<sup>4</sup>See Wilhelm and Marion Pauck, *Paul Tillich: His Life and Thought*, vol. 1 (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 2.

- <sup>5</sup>Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am Not a Christian* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1957), 113; quoted from John B. Rogers Jr., *The Birth of God* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987), 30.
- <sup>6</sup>Jim Holt, “Science Resurrects God,” *The Wall Street Journal*, December 24, 1997.
- <sup>7</sup>Quoted in Sharon Begley, “Science Finds God,” *Newsweek*, July 20, 1998, 49.
- <sup>8</sup>See William Stacy Johnson, *John Calvin, Reformer for the 21st Century* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 15–16.
- <sup>9</sup>Reinhold Niebuhr, “A View of Life from the Sidelines,” in *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr*, ed. Robert McAfee Brown (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986), 256.
- <sup>10</sup>A wonderful phrase used somewhere in a commentary by George A. Buttrick.
- <sup>11</sup>John H. Leith, *From Generation to Generation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), 146.
- <sup>12</sup>Author unknown. Quoted from George A. Buttrick, *Interpreter’s Bible 7* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1951), 563.
- <sup>13</sup>Donald W. Shriver Jr., “Politics: The Mismaligned Calling,” in *The Living Pulpit 5* (April–June, 1996), 10.
- <sup>14</sup>Robert Frost, “The Star-splitter,” in *Complete Poems of Robert Frost* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1964), 219.
- <sup>15</sup>John H. Leith, *Introduction to the Reformed Tradition*, rev. ed. (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), 88.
- <sup>16</sup>John H. Leith, quoted from Theodore J. Wardlaw, “The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and Some Contrasts with the Evangelical Covenanting Order,” presented at Preston Hollow Presbyterian Church, Dallas, Texas, December 14, 2013.
- <sup>17</sup>James A. Sanders, in conversations with the author.
- <sup>18</sup>See Brown, ed., *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr*, xiv.
- <sup>19</sup>Quoted from Eric Routley, *Theology Today* (April 1977), 26.
- <sup>20</sup>Hans-Ruedi Webber, in *Experiments with Bible Study*, World Council of Churches, quoted from *Presbyterian Outlook 164* (January 25, 1982), 1.
- <sup>21</sup>Robert McAfee Brown, *The Bible Speaks to You* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1955), 14.
- <sup>22</sup>John M. Buchanan, “Why I Am a Presbyterian,” sermon, Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, Illinois, October 30, 1994.
- <sup>23</sup>Nelle Morton, *The Journey Is Home* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), xvii–xix.
- <sup>24</sup>Quoted in George W. Webber, *God’s Colony in Man’s World* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1960), 48.
- <sup>25</sup>Donald W. Shriver Jr., *On Second Thought: Essays Out of My Life* (New York: Seabury Books, 2010), 26.
- <sup>26</sup>Hugh Thomson Kerr, “God of Our Life,” in *Glory to God* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), no. 686.
- <sup>27</sup>H. Ganse Little.
- <sup>28</sup>Alfred Lord Tennyson, “In Memoriam,” canto 54.
- <sup>29</sup>Diogenes Allen, “Jesus’ Passion and Ours: To Love Justice Itself,” *Christian Century*, February 17, 1988, 157.
- <sup>30</sup>Here, I am grateful for two strong and nurturing unpublished papers: John F. Jansen, “Some Hallmarks of Our Reformed Tradition,” presented at a session retreat of Parkway Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, Texas, May 14, 1976; and Theodore J. Wardlaw, “The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and Some Contrasts with the Evangelical Covenanting Order,” *ibid.*
- <sup>31</sup>Charles M. Swezey, *As I See It Today*, Union Theological Seminary, Richmond, Virginia (now Union Presbyterian Seminary), June 1976.
- <sup>32</sup>Quoted from Dean K. Thompson, “‘Pay for somebody else’—Remembering Maya Angelou,” *Asheville Citizen-Times*, Sunday, May 31, 2014, A11.



## “Our ‘Presbyterian Virtues’”

### Conversation Starters: Discussion Questions

Barry Ensign-George and Dean Thompson

1. “God blesses us with seasons, gravity, and the balancing of opposites such as work and rest, day and night, having and not having.” How are each of these things blessings to you individually and to us together? Are there downsides to these blessings?
2. Often “sovereignty” seems cold and impersonal. What difference does it make to understand that God’s sovereignty is deeply personal?
3. We affirm that “our lives amount to something good.” How does our affirmation of the sovereignty of God support affirming the goodness of each person’s life?
4. How does our affirmation that “we human beings also possess indeterminate possibilities for sinfulness and destruction” help us understand the world, and God’s relationship to the world?
5. Why doesn’t affirming human sinfulness (including our own sinfulness) contradict our affirmation that “our lives amount to something good”?
6. How does loving God with our hearts contribute to loving God with our minds? How does loving God with our minds contribute to loving God with our hearts?
7. Why does it matter to pass on our faith, to children and to others?
8. What might it look like for your congregation to claim these virtues in your life together? How might that shape your mission?
9. Why do Presbyterians maintain “that, by and large and generally speaking, groups make more trustworthy decisions than individuals”?
10. Agree or disagree? We are "the church in and not out of the world." We are called "to replace other-worldly escapism with ‘worldly responsibilities’”