

In Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple*, Celie is a woman beaten down both by her husband and by life circumstances. She has been despairing of ever knowing the goodness of life, being all but dead in the spirit. Then she meets another woman who has a grace-based spirituality. This woman transforms the way Celie looks at the world around her. In a letter mailed back to her sister Nettie, Celie tells Nettie that God gets "pissed off" if you "walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't [stop and admire the beautiful flowers God has made]." ²⁰ God, according to Celie, feels shortchanged and miffed when God's people don't stop and celebrate God's relationship evident in the ordinariness of creation and life.

Don't leave God feeling shortchanged and miffed. Admire the color purple.

So What Do *You* Think?

1. Have you ever experienced personally or seen on television a service of worship that involved high emotionalism? If so, with respect for the people involved, describe what you saw and heard and what your thoughts were about it.
2. What guidelines would you offer to define when emotional expressions in worship are good and healthy and when they are not?
3. What did you think about the images in this chapter of "mountaintop" and "valley" spirituality? What kind of spirituality do you think most people have? What kind do you have?
4. Can you think of any times in your life when God has blessed you in seemingly "ordinary" encounters or events?

Why Don't You Repent in Dust and Ashes?

Seventeen-year-old William was in his bedroom at 9:15 p.m. on Easter Sunday evening. He picked up the television remote control, thinking he would channel surf for a few minutes before he went over his notes for his three-minute presentation in speech class the next day. After brief stops on channels offering dated cartoons, sitcoms, movies, music videos, and a major league baseball highlight show, he stopped switching long enough to watch a broadcast from a church sanctuary (or "worship center").

There were no lilies visible, so William wondered if this might be a tape-delayed broadcast from some previous week rather than this morning's service. Perhaps because it was Easter night, William found the preacher's words rather depressing in tone. He began the sermon by reading from various newspaper accounts of multiple murders, child abuse, spouse abuse, and adultery. It sounded to William as though this speaker was in a debate class arguing either for the proposition "Sin is rampant," or against the proposition "The world is basically good."

William watched longer than he originally intended, and longer, honestly, than he wanted. He watched long enough for the preacher to repeat previous points of his outline after each next point was explained. "I am persuaded," he said each time, "(first) in the sinfulness of human beings, (then) in the holiness of God, (then) in the atoning blood of Jesus Christ, and (then) in the regenerative power of the Holy Spirit." William surfed on



to a news channel and a weather channel before he punched the "off" button and opened his folder to his own speech notes for the next day.

Twenty minutes later, after he'd brushed his teeth, turned back his bed-covers, lain down, and turned off his study lamp, William stared at the dark ceiling wondering about the contrast between the Easter service he'd attended that morning on the lawn of the neighborhood Lazarus Come Forth Presbyterian Church and the TV preacher's "I am persuaded . . ." outline for his thirty-minute sermon.

He could tell from the Sunday night broadcast that the people in the pews of that church were attentive to their pastor's preaching. He'd also observed attentiveness on the part of the Lazarus Come Forth group that morning, but the service was substantially different: a community prayer of confession, scriptures related to the disciples going to the burial garden and discovering the tomb empty. There had not been a sermon, as such, at that sunrise service, but the pastor had invited the worship participants to speak about meaningfulness they had perceived over the years by God's grace in Jesus, crucified and resurrected.

William felt more "at home" with the service at Lazarus Come Forth Church. "But why?" he thought. "Ought I to be more persuaded, like that preacher, of the sinfulness of human beings, etc.?" He didn't want to "be more persuaded" exactly in that way, but "Should I?" he thought as his eyelids fell shut in sleep.

ARE YOU A SINNER?

If William has been to any Presbyterian worship services at all (and he has), he knows that Presbyterians believe all people are sinners. The Westminster Shorter Catechism (1649) gives a definition of sin as "any want [lack] of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God" (the response to question 14) and further states the extent of sin to include "the guilt of [humanity's] first sin, the want [lack] of original righteousness, and the corruption of [our] whole nature, . . . together with all actual transgressions which proceed from it" (the response to question 18). Some might say, "That about covers everything!" And they'd be right!

So, yes, if asked, "Are you a sinner?" all Presbyterians respond, "Absolutely I am; and so is every other person." Presbyterian-types believe, without qualification, that people are sinners. Yet many Presbyterians also convincingly raise questions about whether creation was ever pure and "perfect" and whether human beings "in the beginning" actually were pure and sinless. "Eden" and "The Fall" (Genesis, chapters 2, 3, and 4) may be

a story illustrating a way to understand the difference between God and humanity in every age.¹

Related to such questions and interpretations, neo-evangelicals and others sometimes comment that Presbyterians speak persuasively about sin being everywhere, but really are "soft on sin." So the question legitimately arises: Don't Presbyterians believe in sin?

Many Presbyterian critics ask this question because they perceive that Presbyterians are not as focused on "sin" as they (the critics) are. We could answer this question as we answered the question "Do you believe in the Bible?" No, Presbyterians don't believe in sin. We believe in the Lord of heaven and earth, but we're thoroughly convinced of the existence of sin.

The early generations of Reformed-Presbyterian folk understood sin as pervasive and, therefore, contaminating every part of our humanness, even our best and most loving of intentions. (See the Westminster Shorter Catechism, response 18, above.)

"Hellfire and brimstone" preachers pleading for aisles full of repentant sinners have picked up a few pointers from the Reformed-Presbyterian notions of the "total depravity" of all people. In the words of Paul's letter to the Romans (3:23), quoted previously in chapter 5, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Many neo-evangelical types, however, imply that sin can, to a great degree, become a matter of the past. They often suggest that sin can be left behind—for the most part—relegated to the "unregenerate" past, the time before one accepts Jesus as Savior.

Many, if not most, neo-evangelicals acknowledge sin as a continuing factor in the life of "the saved" with "spiritual re-dedications" periodically needed. Even so, for many, if there's a recognition of sin after "accepting Jesus," that recognition is frequently limited to thoughts and acts of sinfulness that we recognize and from which we "need to stay clear," obviously "big sins" such as theft, illicit sex, murder, cheating, drug abuse, and the like. But what about sin we don't recognize? Is there abiding sin we might call "small" sin? Is unrecognized "small" sin in the life of Christians "still sin"?

Presbyterians take absolutely seriously the present tense of the verb "fall short" in the Romans 3:23 verse. Presbyterians and certain others believe that sin is a continuing factor in every part of every individual's life and every part of every group's life. Whether big and recognized or small and unrecognized, sin is part of every person's conscious and subconscious being, as well as one's actions, even the most loving and well-intended actions. The same is true for a group's efforts, be those groups church, gang, government, social, school, racial/ethnic, or civic.

The *Book of Order* of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) characterizes one of the "great themes of the Reformed tradition" as being "the recognition of the human tendency to idolatry and tyranny. . . ."² In other words, Presbyterians are absolutely convinced that all of us as humans "pledge allegiance" to choices we make. We "pledge allegiance" to influences, powers, and situations (often "good" influences, powers, and situations) with claims on us that are less than God's claim; therefore, day by day, we actually live as if God's claim is less than the others.

Presbyterians are convinced that sin is everywhere!

It is interesting that, in contrast to neo-evangelicals who believe Presbyterians are "soft" on sin because we don't preach God's "fire and brimstone" judgment enough of the time, philosophical and theological "liberals" often regard the Reformed-Presbyterian tradition as having an unhealthy, over-emphasized, obsessive preoccupation with sin!

It's always very tempting for any of us to think sin (of one sort or another) could not happen here. After the Murrah Federal Building was bombed in Oklahoma City in 1995, people in Oklahoma and across the United States said, "We would never have thought something like that could happen here." The same chorus was heard by residents of Littleton, Colorado, in 1999, when Columbine High School was devastated by a pair of gun-firing, bomb-planting students who murdered thirteen before committing suicide: "We would never have thought something like that could happen here."

In both instances, the sin of thinking a certain kind of sin could not surface in a given place was exposed by the sin of horrific violence, which obviously was possible all along. Three days after the Littleton, Colorado, tragedy, one anti-public school commentator interviewed on national television said, "You don't hear of things like this happening in private schools." Before noon on that same day, though, school officials at a Roman Catholic (private) school in Tulsa, Oklahoma, made public a web site created by a relatively small group of students at the school that contained written threats against certain fellow students and faculty members. Murder had not taken place at the private school, and those guilty of the threats said, "It was a joke," but one anti-public school commentator was shown guilty for the sin of thinking sin is limited to places other than his place of preference.

Daniel Migliore summarizes Reformed-Presbyterian "paradoxes" of sin: (1) Sin is both a "universal condition" and a "self-chosen act" for which individuals and groups are responsible; (2) sin is part of all human action, both what's identified as evil and what's perceived as good; (3) sin corrupts individual persons and corporate structures.³

Yet some neo-evangelicals and others wonder if Presbyterians, who believe sin is everywhere, actually believe anything much at all about sin. Reformed churchman and teacher John Leith has noted that the "distinctive theology of the Reformation" from Luther and Calvin rose from their common belief that, in spite of the seriousness and pervasiveness of sin in human life (individually and corporately), God still calls people by grace to new life and service. One side of this coin is that human ability does not make us new. The other side of the same coin is that sin does not disqualify us from God's relating to us over and over and over.⁴

While Presbyterians believe that sin is everywhere and that we either are continually attracted to or end up serving various "idolatries" and "tyrannies," we are equally convinced that God is not finished with us. God has callings of value for us in life, sinners though we always are.

SELF-RIGHTEOUS OR SELF-ACCEPTING?

Given the Presbyterian understanding of sin and grace, there's a choice: Will we be self-righteous or self-accepting? We know that we cannot presume we are ever without sin (1 John 1:8). To presume, at any point in life, even when "trusting God" and "accepting Jesus," that one is free of sin is, tragically, to be self-righteous (Luke 18:9-14).

If we agree with the saying "Underneath our clothes, we're all always naked," one might say, then, "The goal is to wear clothes to cover the nakedness." Someone from a nudist community, of course, would argue, "If we're all always naked, we might as well not wear clothes."

It's true, nakedness (or humanness) is not the same as sinfulness. Yet, if we are to be faithful to God, we cannot either ignore our sinfulness (as a nudist ignores nudity) or be preoccupied in covering our sinfulness (as more traditional clothes-wearers cover nakedness).

Confession is the statement recognizing and acknowledging an attitudinal turning away from sin, and repentance is what we call this turning of attitude from sin to God. In repentance, confessing sin is the antidote that keeps people from the dual dangers of either ignoring sin or trying to hide it. Presbyterians often confess sin together in worship, reading printed prayers, then continuing confession to God in silent prayer.

According to the Gospels, Jesus was often "on a tear" against self-righteousness, which is the ignoring or the covering of one's sin. That's all done with attitudes, rationalizations, and opinions. Repentance and confession, therefore, cannot be once-in-a-lifetime experiences. To use neo-evangelical terms, "inviting Jesus into one's heart" on one particular

day does not eliminate the need to repent and confess from day to day.

Still, there is more to this sin-repentance-confession routine. The God who judges human sinfulness and forgives human sinfulness is continually choosing to work with God's people every day. Instead of being depressed, discouraged, or guilt-burdened about sin in its many forms, God calls us daily to participate in the new life we are told is possible through God's promises to Abraham and Sarah, to their descendants, Israel, and in the "person and work" of Jesus.

William wondered why he preferred the Easter sunrise prayers, hymns, and scripture at Lazarus Come Forth Presbyterian to the television preacher's "I am persuaded" sermon. Much of the difference between the two is "style." Any person's preference for one or the other could be based on personal "taste," being more drawn to one or the other. The negative side of the "I am persuaded" preacher's style is conveying the impression that if "you'll take my answer, you can get your off-track life back on track."

The style of the Easter sunrise service William had attended acknowledges human sinfulness, then encourages each person to consider who we are as people of God, the God who knows, loves, meets, calls, heals, sacrifices for, and gives grace to us all so that we may live lives made new day by day with all others. The worship service encouraged William to accept himself as: (1) a child of God; (2) a sinner needing and able to repent daily; and (3) a brother of other human beings on whom God has also not given up.

Self-acceptance in the gospel is the alternative to self-righteousness. Such self-acceptance does not ignore that sin is everywhere all the time. Such self-acceptance trusts God to continue working with us all, calling us all daily to repentance and confession for the purposes of creating love, justice, forgiveness, sacrifice, peace, wholeness, and so forth. God does this through us and others, sinners though we always are.

In the story of Job, when Job says to God that he (Job) "despises" himself and will "repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:6), the traditional interpretation is that Job, in relation to God and in Job's own understanding, accepts a humanity drained and void of self-worth. At least one different interpretation, though, translates "despise" as indicating that he (Job) is admitting before God how he now understands both God's sovereignty and his own humanity in a way different from before. The Hebrew word traditionally translated "despise," might also be translated as "I see/hear/understand."

From chapters 38 through 41 of Job, God, speaking to Job, has argued that God is holy and that it's at least inappropriate for any human to know

"all about God." Job, according to God, is human, but Job's humanity is no reason for surrendering the integrity of his humanity to life's agonies. God never disrespects or disdains Job for Job's anguished questions. Following this face-to-face hearing with God, Job "understands" anew and repents "of" (not "in") the self-pity and attitude of remorse ("dust and ashes") in which he was tempted to remain.⁵

God's conversation with Job and that story's conclusion also "justify" Job without his (Job's) surrendering to the theology of the "friends/arguers/preachers" who tried to convince him that some unrecognized sin was the cause of God's punishing him with tragedy. Job's friends were not correct, though Job had a relationship with God that needed attention.

So do we all. Biblical and spiritual self-acceptance is never satisfaction either with suffering in the world or with sin in our lives. Biblical and spiritual self-acceptance realizes and believes (1) that neither the world nor we as people are ever without sin and (2) that God is continually working with us for God's holy purposes, whatever happens in life or in death all around.

WHY WE HONOR ALL PEOPLE!

Leviticus 19:15–18 teaches both about love of neighbors, neighbors with whom you do not always "get along very well," and about love of self. Jesus quotes from Leviticus 19:18 (Matthew 22:34–40) and, in at least one instance, specifically adds love of enemies to the teachings on "love of neighbor" (Matthew 5:43–46). This perspective on God, sin, and humanity led John Calvin and others in Geneva, Switzerland, to fashion these two questions and responses as part of the Geneva Catechism:

Question: What do you understand by the term neighbor?

Response: Not only kindred and friends, or those connected with us by any necessary tie, but also those who are unknown to us, and even enemies.

Question: But what connection have they with us?

Response: They are connected by that tie by which God bound the whole human race together. This tie is sacred and inviolable, and no person's depravity can abolish it.⁶

How much William's theology and faith actually differ from the neo-evangelical preacher on television with the "I am persuaded" sermon on sin and salvation we cannot know, unless we were to ask that pastor some

direct questions. Yet William's instincts in preferring the Easter sunrise service at Lazarus Come Forth Presbyterian Church are very biblical instincts.

So What Do *You* Think?

1. Do you think it would be a good thing or a bad thing if the idea of "sin" disappeared from our awareness? Why?
2. In the Bible, the man Job has a heartfelt dispute—perhaps even an argument—with God. Tell, write, sketch, sing, or mime about a experience when you, like Job, had a heart-to-heart discussion with God.

Who's in Charge?

PRAYING FOR YOU

Sarah and Khalid are juniors at John and Thurgood Marshall High School. Over a six-week period, they've been out together for one dance, a couple of movies, and an evening of skating. One afternoon, at her locker, after the day's last bell, Sarah noticed her friends Sherry and Bill approaching. "How's it going?" Sarah greeted them.

"Great," they said, almost in one voice.

"Sarah," Sherry began, "Bill and I want you to know that you and Khalid are in our prayers."

"Thanks," replied Sarah, "but is there something I should know that I don't know right now?"

"We're praying that you'll lead Khalid to a personal relationship with Jesus," Bill said.

"I didn't know that it's necessary for me to do that," Sarah responded, somewhat puzzled. "Why are you guys worried about this? I'm a Christian and Khalid is a Muslim. If that's okay for us, can't that be okay with y'all?"