

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?"

"But," said Sherry, "John 14:6 quotes Jesus as saying, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except by me.' Our preacher says Christians shouldn't date non-Christians."

"So?" replied Sarah, still puzzled, a little irritated, and feeling some pressure from these two she'd known for ten years. "I'll pray about it. Thanks for your concern," she added as she closed her locker and headed to catch the bus. "Oh," she turned to add, "what's interesting to me is that Khalid's uncle tells him the same thing about dating non-Muslims that your pastor tells you about dating non-Christians." As Sarah turned and departed to board the bus, Sherry and Bill looked at one another, not knowing what else to say.

In the story above, Sherry and Bill (possibly without realizing it) are essentially saying, "Shouldn't you believe what my preacher says?" Sarah's short answer to this question could be "No." Her longer and less blunt answer could be "Not necessarily." And her still longer answer could be, "I shouldn't even believe what my own preacher says."

We already know Sarah is a human being (duh!). She has the capacity and ability to make decisions about her relationships and about her values and her faith. Let's say Sarah is also a Presbyterian. If she really is a Presbyterian, she certainly is on solid ground by resisting the spiritual pressure of her well-meaning friends. But what about any faith-based decisions she may make, similar to or different from Bill and Sherry?

DO PRESBYTERIANS BELIEVE IN ANY AUTHORITY?

Sarah may not be at all interested in the Presbyterian Church's understanding of decision-making. But if she is, a legitimate beginning question is whether Presbyterians believe in any authority over personal ethical choice and decisions. Sarah's friends, who seem to have been taught that their pastor's opinion is authoritative for church members' decision-making, might be wondering something like this, especially if Sarah ever tells them she is a Presbyterian and she doesn't necessarily even accept her own pastor's opinion as being exactly what she ought to do.

If Sarah is looking for some guidance in making certain decisions, for example, about her friendship with Khalid, there are "Presbyterian-type

building blocks" from which she can construct her decisions; or, put another way, there are "Presbyterian-type threads" from which she can weave her decisions. Some of these are based on Reformed and Presbyterian understandings of: (1) human beings as created by God, with much in common and with much uniqueness; (2) people, the world, and the church as organic and connected; and (3) sin and grace as related to the vocation (the "calling") of humans to serve as God's stewards.

Let's explore these three blocks for building, or threads for weaving, a process of decision-making as Presbyterians.

1. *Human beings are created by God with commonality, uniqueness, and diversity.*

Created by God, persons and groups may have much in common with certain others, even with many others. Also, each person and each group, in the infinite variety of God's universe, is unique. We call that "diversity." Diversity, as an aspect of God's wisdom in creation, is to be appreciated and honored.

In the preceding chapter, we noted that all human beings are all always sinners. That never means that all sins are equal in the effects or outcomes they have, but that all people are equally immersed in sin.

This "sinfulness of all believers" is the counterpoint to the often-mentioned Protestant understanding of the "priesthood of all believers." The priesthood of all believers has been commonly understood to mean that a clergy person is not required as a spiritual intercessor, or priest, in order for a "regular" person's prayers to be heard and received by God. Some have alleged that Presbyterians do not fully believe in the priesthood of all believers because Presbyterians require an ordained clergy for the administration of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper. Presbyterians, however, are emphatic that the clergy, while trained in Bible, theology, and the care of people, are not up any notches on the spiritual ladder or do not have any sharper spiritual ears to discern God's whispers more accurately than anyone else; neither can it be said that regular church members are down any notches on the ladder from the clergy.

*God works even through
Presbyterian committees.*

In other words, yes, Sarah—a person created by God both unique and with much in common with others—is perhaps younger and less experienced in life than many other people, but God has given her a mind and a personality for learning and for informed decision-making as much as God has given the same to Bill and Sherry and their pastor. Moreover, God will still be working with Sarah next month, next year, next decade, and throughout her life, beyond and through any decision she makes today and tomorrow, whether her decisions in any given day are more faithful or less faithful, whether her decisions work out well or not so well. This continuing effort and work of God with God's people brings us to the next "building block" or "thread for weaving," which is that . . .

2. *People, the world, and the church are both organic and connected.*

The word "organic" means more than "alive." Organic includes the process of evolving and changing from one stage, phase, or chapter in life to another, for example: conception, birth, physical development, biological and chemical alterations, learning, endings, death, and different (or new) beginnings, and so on.

"Organic" and, more particularly, "the process of evolving and changing" should not be associated (at least not for Presbyterians) with "spiritual" progress in the relationship between humans and God. Granted, one may argue that from walking (in one era) to space travel (in another era) is "progress," or that from using plant roots, leaves, and tree bark for medicinal purposes in one location or time period to using synthetic antibiotics in another location or time period is "progress." Most Presbyterians, however, will not concede in any argument that people are any less sinners in one time or place than another. We're all always sinners, yet this organic aspect of life—as God has created—continually makes possible an evolving, changing, and maturing of any person's relationship with God and an evolving, changing, and maturing of the church's ministry efforts.

Sarah's friendship (whether romantic or not) with Khalid provides an example of a person's relationship to God and to God's people that illustrates commonality, that expresses uniqueness and diversity, and that always has organic dimensions. The possibility exists that Sarah will grow, evolve, change, and mature as a person, and that this will happen through her learning and considerations with respect to her relationship with Khalid and with others.

Should Sarah be a Presbyterian, though, who looks to the church for guidance in decision-making, it's crucial to understand an element of creation in addition to each person or group having much in common with others, in addition to each person or group being unique and diverse, and in addition to the life of each person or group having organic dimensions. That additional element is the connective nature of people, the world, and the church.

While we generally are aware that persons and groups are inter-related, from automobile owners and coffee drinkers in the United States to oil producers in the Middle East and coffee growers in Central or South America, Presbyterians (and certain other faith-traditions) go a step further, believing that, as the church is a corporate body, people associated as "church" have a connected relationship.

As one theologian has put it: "There can be no church without local congregations and no local churches except as they participate in the universal church."¹ Presbyterians, convinced that this connective nature is important, practice ministry through the church: (a) recognizing and honoring Jesus Christ as head of the church and as the complete revelation of God's involvement with God's people (noted particularly in chapter 4);² and (b) recognizing and honoring the elements of debate, agreement, and disagreement among God's people, as much in the church as in the world.

Presbyterian-types have encouraged and continue to encourage debate, agreement, and disagreement because:

- We have believed that God calls each of God's people to a faithful stewardship of each one's mind and relationships, since "faith and practice, truth and duty" go together;³
- We have believed that "God alone is Lord of the conscience" when any persons or groups have advice or opinions that conflict with scripture;⁴
- We have believed that laypersons and church governing bodies do make errors at times and do act wrongly whenever pressuring people to "go along" with a given interpretation or ruling, with which those being pressured do not agree (such pressure is called "binding the consciences" of others, and it's wrong because church "power" rightly is "ministerial and declarative," that is, serving and proclaiming in its nature, not coercive and manipulative);⁵ and

- We have believed that God is leading God's people to be engaged "in, with, against, and for the world" according to God's love and call in Jesus Christ.⁶

This connectional nature of the church is not a cemented nature. Rather, it's the result of our being created by God with much in common and with much uniqueness and diversity, as well as being created by God with organic and connected characteristics.

3. *Sin and grace are related to our vocation ("calling") as God's people "in, with, against, and for the world."*

This means the God who, in grace, creates the universe, the earth, people, and so forth, also, in grace, redeems and makes human life new continually. Sin is always everywhere, and in spite of sin, God's grace is present continually. (Grace is the word!) Because of grace, then, vocation ("calling") is never what a person does to earn a living but always how one lives serving God every day in life. If vocation ("calling") is how one lives serving God every day of life, that makes God's people "stewards" in God's world, called to faithful stewardship of every part of life, including working, volunteering, decision-making, studying, relaxing, learning, being a friend, and so forth, while being shaped daily by God's Word and Spirit.⁷

We're now ready to ask: If Presbyterian-type "blocks" for "building decisions" or "threads" for "weaving decisions" include these parts (the way God creates with commonality, uniqueness, and diversity; the way God creates persons, church, and world as organic and connected; and the way God, by grace, calls God's people to a whole-life vocation of stewardship), what considerations can contribute to Sarah's decision-making about her friendship with Khalid?

We presume Sherry and Bill and their pastor would have in mind Jesus' frequently quoted verse "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).

Sarah, with the assistance of her pastor, or without, could study John's Gospel to learn that a clear anti-Jewish bias existed among many Christians in the time the account was written, possibly fifty years after Jesus' death and resurrection (such a bias comes through, for example, in John 14:6). That fact, however, does not mean either that Jesus did not say it or that the theology of the statement might not be true, though in a way different from the way many interpreters have tended to interpret it. Usually, this verse has been

interpreted as being a "weeding out" declaration by Jesus. In other words, Sherry and Bill's pastor believes Khalid needs to "accept Jesus as Lord and Savior" because otherwise Khalid won't have a prayer for eternal life in God's presence. (God "won't let him in" except as Jesus approves him.)

But what if it's true in another way? What if the truth here, in a century different from the time in which it was written, is not a bias against Jews and other non-Christians? What if the truth here lies in Jesus' being the Good Shepherd, the Gatekeeper, the Messiah-Redeemer who allows into God's presence all who recognize God's way, truth, and life, but with some of those who recognize God's way, truth, and life being people who live and interpret differently from others? In that case, the voice of the One who is "the way, the truth, and the life" sounds different to some in different centuries and cultures than that voice sounded to John who recorded this particular Gospel account, and it possibly sounds different from how any of us hear that Good Shepherd's voice.

Reformed/Presbyterian-types have, for centuries, been reluctant to declare whom God has "chosen" and whom God has "not chosen."⁸ Moreover, increasingly Presbyterians have been recognizing that a clear study of scripture means seeking to hear God's voice in scripture while, at the same time, identifying potentially unhealthy biases that are mixed into the texts of the Bible. This means seeking to be guided by the still living Word heard in the written words of the Bible.⁹

Sarah may conclude, in good faith, that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life of God, not only for her and for professed Christians, but for all. She may further conclude, though, that certain representations of Jesus by certain well-meaning, self-proclaimed representatives of Jesus do not help her make decisions that she believes are most faithful to the God whom she's come to know in Jesus.

If Sarah decides through study and discussions and prayer that Khalid need not be converted to Christianity for him to be worthy as her friend (or spouse) in the eyes of God, she can make that decision "on good authority" in the Reformed and Presbyterian traditions. She can make that decision still respecting, but without having to agree with, the faith convictions of Bill, Sherry, their pastor, or Sarah's own pastor.

CHURCH PROFESSIONALS OR A PROFESSING CHURCH?

If Sarah happened to be a Presbyterian, and if Presbyterians are recognized as being able to make decisions of conscience through prayerful considera-

tions of scripture, history, science, church confessional statements, and the wisdom of other people, then how do Presbyterians understand church authority in relation to the clergy? Put another way, do we understand our most faithful witness to depend on "church professionals"? Presbyterian theologian Daniel Migliore summarizes some general observations against "church" and church "professionals" (who could be clergy or members):

1. The tendency to promote spiritual individualism or to surrender to cultural individualism;
2. The tendency to cater to individual members and to almost privatized, homogeneous groups (groups wherein members are quite similar in their opinions, backgrounds, current life situations, etc.);
3. The tendency to develop and maintain structure that supports existing rules and "rulers";
4. The tendency to tolerate (and even promote) a spirituality and discipleship that "talks the talk" but does not faithfully "walk the walk" of God with Israel and in Jesus.¹⁰

Presbyterian-types, at their best, encourage church professionals and church officers prayerfully to develop a deep and authentic spirituality for discipleship and leadership. (Sarah may have known her pastor and church officers to be this way.) There's an equal emphasis for all members to do the same, Sarah included; and, as her comments indicate, she at least somewhat realizes this.¹¹

When development of spirituality for discipleship and leadership occurs day by day, from generation to generation, one group of God's people will be observed by others to be more a professing church than one predominantly relying on the pronouncements of church professionals.

WHY WE DO IT DECENTLY AND IN ORDER!

It has been said of Presbyterians, "They do (church) decently and in order." Some would say that makes Presbyterians obsessed with too many rules, too much legalese. A lawyer is required to figure out the system. To some degree, this may be true, but the purpose behind the orderliness is to encourage the mutual ministry of Jesus Christ.

Because Presbyterians work in mission in community, we do not make up the rules as we go along. This practice is rooted in the understanding that, in our relationships, God prefers order to chaos or manipulation. Of course, this never eliminates sin or human error within the church, which

are always with us, even at some (or many) meetings of Presbyterian groups! At times, we admit, people manipulate the process for their personal or political advantage. But Presbyterians believe that an orderly system of church government is the best way to ensure that conflict can get resolved and that the church can move toward new life. On the human side, there are checks and balances and oversight from the local church to the national assembly of the church. On the divine side, the Lord is at work among and through us.

Someone has said, "Presbyterians believe the Holy Spirit 'moves' through ordered groups."¹² In that "decently and in order" process of prayer, study, debate, deliberation, and voting, Presbyterians are convinced the church, by God's grace, can be open to and led by God's continuing call. Through the ages, people—we among them—are called and engaged as disciples and stewards of God's grace in every part of life, all to the glory of God.

So What Do *You* Think?

1. Picture in your mind three leadership styles: one that pressures too much, one that pressures too little, and one that's just right. Describe the styles, actions, and other qualities of each.
2. Read again the story of Sarah and Khalid. What do you think Sarah should do?
3. Suppose that someone running for President of the United States said that every decision a President makes should be based strictly on the Bible. Would this make you want to vote for this candidate or not? Why?