

Theology Matters

Vol. 30, No. 4

Fall 2024

Learning to Say No For the Sake of God's Yes

by Richard E. Burnett

He went out again beside the sea; and all the crowd gathered about him, and he taught them. And as he passed on, he saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax office, and he said to him, "Follow me." And he rose and followed him. And as he sat at table in his house, many tax collectors and sinners were sitting with Jesus and his disciples; for there were many who followed him. And the scribes of the Pharisees, when they saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, said to his disciples, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" And when Jesus heard it, he said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I came not to call the righteous, but sinners." Mark 2:13-17

We do not know much about this man Levi. We do not know about his background, his personality, or what he was thinking when Jesus walked by. All we are told is that he was a tax collector. Tax collectors were not popular. Apparently, they have never been.

When I was a pastor in New Jersey I once went to a men's breakfast and saw a man sitting by himself. So, I sat down with him. We talked. I asked him what he did for a living. He said he worked for the IRS. Later, I asked him if people treated him differently once they knew. He said they often *did*. He said: "They often just sort of clam up." I said: "We have something in common!" ... I suppose there are different ways of being audited.

Working as a tax collector in the first century however was especially difficult because it meant you worked for Rome. One reason Rome's Empire was so successful is because it had very effective ways of collecting taxes. Rome used indigenous folk, locals, to collect taxes because they knew where the money was. Tax collectors earned their living by taking a cut off the top. Many took more than their share. Thus, they were hated. They were hated not only because they were often greedy but also because they were considered traitors. In fact, for Jews in the first century, the word "tax collector" had become a synonym for "sinner."

So, when we read about Jesus associating with tax collectors, such as Levi or Zacchaeus, this is helpful information. Yet it's not decisive. It tells us something, but it doesn't tell us much. It doesn't tell us why such a man in such a time in such a place would leave everything simply because someone walked by and said to him: "*Follow me*." The text does not tell us. It gives us no further information. Don't you find this odd?

Mark's Gospel focuses on the theme of discipleship. From the beginning to the end, it's about what it means to be called by and to follow Jesus Christ. And here at the

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outset where Jesus calls his *first* disciple, you would think there would be more details or some sort of explanation as to why Levi follows Jesus. But the text is silent. It offers no explanation. Nothing. Isn't this strange?

Why Did Levi Follow Jesus?

There is no description of Levi's psychological frame of mind, no account of his spiritual journey, no indication of his mental or emotional state or his spiritual condition. There is no talk about his quest for meaning or personal longings. We are given no insights into his hopes, dreams, or aspirations, nothing about his struggles, his sins, or the sorts of questions he had. There is not one word about his inner life, his motives or intentions. All we are told is that he was sitting at the tax office and Jesus walked by and "said to him, 'Follow me.' And he rose and followed him."

Many interpreters have been disturbed by this lack of information. They want to know more about Levi's mental or emotional state, his moral or spiritual condition, about what he must have been thinking. After all, it just doesn't make sense that a man would simply walk away from a perfectly good job to follow someone who simply walks by one day and says, "Follow me."

So, some interpreters speculate. They attribute all kinds of motives to Levi: 1) He must have been going through some sort of crisis, perhaps a moral crisis. 2) or perhaps it was a mid-life crisis: he was sick of his job and seeking a career change; 3) or perhaps he was bored and needed adventure, and like any good businessman, he took a personal inventory, made a cost-benefit analysis, weighed all the pluses and minuses and, despite all potential risks, decided that here were the prospects of a very bright and promising future. But the text says nothing about any of this. It simply states: Jesus said: "'Follow me.' And he rose and followed him."

Why is Mark's Gospel so *disinterested* in what interests so many of us? Why is it so ruthlessly silent about these sorts of issues? It's because they are not the point. What matters here is not so much the circumstances of those who are called, but the power and authority of the One who calls. It's not primarily about the moral, spiritual, or psychological conditions of those who are called. It's about the power and authority of Him who calls, the power and authority of Jesus Christ. That's what's essential. That's what's decisive. That's what's fundamentally at issue if we're to understand what's at stake here.

Notice Jesus is not portrayed as "the Answer" to Levi's questions. In fact, Jesus is never portrayed in the New Testament as "the Answer" to anybody's question. Have you noticed that? Have you noticed that apart from a prior relationship with Him, no one ever seems to come to Jesus with the right question? Coming to Him cold, no

one ever seems to get it right. Why? It's because He's not simply "The Answer" to our questions. He's "the Lord." He's not what folk were looking or longing for all along. No, He's beyond that. He's *the Lord*. He comes with power and authority. He tells Levi, "Follow me." And it says Levi "rose and followed him."

It's not that Jesus doesn't give us answers. Once we know Him as the Lord, He gives us all sorts of answers—more than most of us want! But until we know He's Lord, we don't know the right questions—about Him, about ourselves, or just about anything of importance. But knowing He's the Lord changes everything.

The text does make one thing clear about Levi: He's a sinner. Jesus makes that clear when he tells the Pharisees, "I came not to call the righteous, but sinners." The scribes of the Pharisees did not like that Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners. You see, immediately after being called, there was a meal or party at Levi's home, it says, "at table in his house," to celebrate, apparently, Levi's new calling. But the scribes of the Pharisees did not like it. They took offense at it.

Why Did the Scribes Take Offense?

The scribes of the Pharisees were upset not only because Jesus ate with Levi and other tax collectors. Levi had not yet shown any signs of repentance—no confession or contrition, no sackcloth or ashes, no rending of garments or outward signs of penance. Nothing. Thus, the scribes of the Pharisees were skeptical. They likely felt Levi's life deserved a bit more scrutiny. More attention to his moral and spiritual condition was needed. They wanted to see the audit—some sort of moral and spiritual audit—before they could accept his so-called 'conversion.'

We ought not be surprised. After all, he had probably ripped some of them off. So, the demand for evidence—at least some credible preliminary signs of repentance—is understandable. It's natural. Indeed, it's not only natural. It is the way of *religion*. Most religions have a process, a method, or system of rituals or exercises for people to express or demonstrate repentance—a change of heart and mind.

The Roman church of the late Middle Ages, for example, had developed an elaborate penitential system, a highly elaborate process of repentance that began with compunction, then contrition, then confession, then penance, and then, if all went well, eventually, absolution, the declaration of forgiveness. By following this process, each step or stage of this penitential program, one could be forgiven. And, as you know, the Protestant Reformers of the sixteenth century—all of them—rejected these penitential exercises, this elaborate process of repentance, and declared that we are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. They said true

repentance is a consequence not a prerequisite of faith. They said we are saved because of what Christ did for us on the cross, by Christ's righteousness, which he imputes or reckons to us, and we receive—not by works or merit, or by cooperating with God's grace—but purely and simply as a gift—a gift of grace.

Of course, this led to all sorts of misunderstanding, as you know. "What's the matter with you Protestants, don't you care about works?" "You say you've been redeemed by Christ's righteousness, but some of you don't look so redeemed." "So, *where* is your righteousness?" "You say you've been saved by grace, but what about repentance?" This is what the scribes of the Pharisees were wondering about with this tax collector, Levi. They wanted to see "the fruits of repentance." They wanted to see the audit. They wanted to see if Levi was sincere. And Levi's life did *eventually* bear the fruit of repentance. But such fruit usually takes time to ripen, does it not?¹

What Causes People to Repent?

One big question that Jesus' encounter with Levi raises is: What causes people to repent? What causes people truly and sincerely to repent of their sins? The Reformers, again, as many of you know, had lots to say about this, John Calvin not least among them. Calvin insisted that repentance is a consequence of faith, not a precondition or prerequisite of faith. Why? Because no one, Calvin says, can truly repent without first having tasted God's grace. Calvin puts it like this: "a man cannot apply himself seriously to repentance without knowing himself to belong to God. But no one is truly persuaded that he belongs to God unless he has first recognized God's grace." "Repentance is preached in vain," Calvin says, "except men entertain the hope of salvation." "Indeed," Calvin says, "no one gives himself freely and willingly to God's service unless, having tasted his fatherly love, he is drawn to love and worship him in return." Do you see the point here? Grace comes first. Love comes first.²

I once had a student who was shocked to hear this. He said: "In my church you gotta get folk *lost* before you get 'em *found*." "You gotta make 'em feel *bad* before you make 'em feel *good*. You gotta make 'em feel guilty, needy, desperate, or insecure before you can convince 'em they need a Savior. You gotta turn up the heat and make 'em squirm so the Lord can save 'em and then straighten 'em out."³

Well, this is not what Calvin and the mainstream of the Reformed tradition has taught. Calvin draws an important distinction between two types of repentance—one he calls "repentance of the law" and the other "repentance of the gospel." Repentance of the law goes like this: "Repent, climb the ladder, fulfill the law, and IF you complete these stages of repentance: compunction, contrition, confession, penance, etc., just as Rome's

penitential system prescribed, and IF you are sincere (and we have our ways of finding out if you're sincere), then you'll be forgiven." Of course, the young monk Luther's problem was that he was never quite sure he was entirely sincere, had done enough, or that God truly loved him.⁴

"Repentance of the gospel" goes like this: Do you know the lengths God was willing to go to save you from your sins, the heights from which he came, the depths to which he was willing to condescend, the extent to which he suffered on the cross to make atonement for our sins? Do you know how much he loves us and gave himself for us? Do you know how much he has done to save us from the bondage of sin and death? This is good news. It is *for you*. So, *receive* it and now repent. Do you see the difference?

Repentance according to the law shows that God is just and righteous, but it can imply that God somehow needs to be conditioned, appeased, or placated into being gracious, loving, merciful, and forgiving. The Reformers never doubted for a moment, of course, that God is just, righteous, and punishes sin. Yet they also believed that God did not need to be conditioned, appeased, or placated into being a gracious, loving, merciful, and forgiving God. He showed He was all that and more on the cross.

Repentance of the law also implies not only that God has to be conditioned, but that *we* can be conditioned—or we can condition ourselves—into true repentance. And this is precisely what the Reformers rejected when they insisted that we are saved by grace alone, not by works of the law or following the penitential system of the Roman Church. Sure, you and I can change in some ways by conditioning ourselves. We can lay down the law for others and even for ourselves and demand compliance. And I do not suggest circumstances may not require it. We may even get results. We may even be successful in modifying the behavior of others or our own. But such measures will *never* truly change anyone's heart or mind. They will *never* yield true repentance because true repentance, the Bible teaches, is a gift of grace.

"Worldly grief" produces sorrow, Paul says, but only "godly grief" leads to repentance (2 Cor. 7:10f). True repentance comes only as a consequence of knowing, first and last, that we are loved by God. Grace comes first. Love comes first. That is why Calvin says: "Repentance not only follows faith, but is also born of faith." Calvin then adds this remarkable claim: "There are some, however, who suppose that repentance precedes faith, rather than flows from it, or is produced by it as fruit from a tree. Such persons have never known the power of repentance."⁵ Thus, for Calvin, the power of repentance is born of grace, flows from grace, and is fueled by grace.

True repentance, Scripture teaches, is a gift. It does not come as a consequence of hitting rock bottom, discover-

ing our true needs or limits, the depths of our misery, despair, or depravity. And it certainly does not occur by being shamed or threatened with punishment. It comes by encountering the love of the Lord Jesus, just as Levi did. It comes by encountering the power and authority of Jesus Christ who, just before encountering Levi, tells the paralytic, “My son, your sins are forgiven. Take up your pallet and go home.”

True repentance takes a miracle—the miracle of God’s grace. It comes as a consequence of knowing that we *belong* to God and are *loved* by God. And don’t miss Jesus’ first word to the paralytic, “My son” (τέκνον)—a word of affection. This is why Calvin says: “Repentance not only follows faith, but is also born of faith.” It’s born of grace. It’s born of love. It’s born of hearing the Gospel, the good news, God’s Yes to us in Jesus Christ.

This is why repentance in the New Testament is not so much a matter of sackcloth and ashes as it is joy and celebration. This is also why repentance so often leads immediately to parties or celebrations in the New Testament, as it did for Levi, Zacchaeus, and the Prodigal Son. Have you noticed this? Grace leads immediately to repentance. Repentance leads immediately to parties.

Yes, I said *parties*! This may be a surprising word to hear at a conference of Presbyterians or mostly Presbyterians because parties are not exactly what we are known for. On the contrary, many look at us and say we are party-challenged, party-inhibited, lacking in celebratory spirit. It is not true. It is a caricature. We can have parties—“decently and in order,” of course! But we can celebrate, and we have, historically. But the way we have celebrated is by giving glory to God, by praising God, and by living a life of gratitude, which, according to Calvin and our tradition, is the sum and essence of the Christian life.

We celebrate “by glorifying God and enjoying him forever,” which means the Christian life is not about striving to *earn* our salvation—or even about *our* salvation at all! It’s about responding in gratitude to God for his grace and mercy! Yes, the Christian life still involves repentance, “daily repentance,” Calvin insists. Yes, there is still striving. Yes, there is still work. But for those who have experienced “the power of repentance” that Calvin talks about, the motivation is completely different.

Justification and Sanctification

The Reformed tradition has always insisted that justification and sanctification go together. They come to us as a “double grace.” They must not be confused, but must also never be separated because they are, Calvin says, “joined by an everlasting and indissoluble bond.” How Calvin relates and elaborates justification and sanctification is among the most brilliant contributions of his *Institutes*.⁶

So what’s the point? The point is parties are appropriate. Parties celebrating God’s grace and mercy, the forgiveness of sins and our callings, the fellowship we have in Christ, God’s Yes to us in Jesus Christ—such celebrations are entirely in order. In fact, if we don’t celebrate such occasions there likely is something wrong with us and our critics are right to call us smug, dour, or “the frozen chosen.”

Yet, the New Testament does not suggest the Christian life is simply a perpetual party. No, the Christian life includes work, plenty of work. Have you noticed how often in the New Testament Jesus gives people something to do immediately after meeting him? Jesus tells the paralytic, “My son, your sins are forgiven. Take up your pallet and go home.” He tells Levi, “Follow me.” Few people meet Jesus in the New Testament without being given something to do. The Christian life is not just about justification or sanctification. It is also about vocation.

The Christian life involves toil, struggle, strife, and sacrifice. Yes, the Holy Spirit gives us strength to face all sorts of toil, struggle, strife, and sacrifice with joy, but we still can’t describe the Christian life as a perpetual party. That would be to embrace what Luther calls a “theology of glory” rather than a less triumphalistic, more sober, “theology of the cross.” Yet describing the Christian life primarily in terms of a theology of the cross does not quite capture the sum or essence of the Christian life, either, for those of us in the Reformed tradition.

The Second Article of the Barmen Declaration however offers us a beautiful description of the sum or essence of the Christian life when it says:

As Jesus Christ is God’s assurance of the forgiveness of all our sins [that’s justification], so in the same way and with the same seriousness is he also God’s mighty claim upon our whole life [that’s sanctification]. [And here is the summary]: Through him befalls us a joyful deliverance from the godless fetters of this world for a free, grateful service to his creatures.

What’s so beautiful about this description of the Christian life is that it holds justification and sanctification together without confusing them. It even includes vocation when it speaks of “a free, grateful *service* to his creatures.” Even more striking is that in speaking of “a *joyful deliverance* from the godless fetters of this world,” it captures beautifully what Calvin emphasizes when he insists that true repentance is “repentance unto the gospel,” not unto the law. It is not the fruit of wallowing in guilt or shame or following penitential exercises.

True repentance is born of faith. It is born of hearing the good news, of tasting God’s grace, of recognizing God’s love. True repentance is “a *joyful deliverance from the*

godless fetters of this world.” Christians live from God’s grace, from hearing the Gospel, the good news, God’s “Yes” to us in Jesus Christ.

If We Say Yes to Jesus Christ

But we cannot simply leave it at that. We cannot do justice to describing the Christian life if we stop here. God’s Yes to us in Jesus Christ demands a response. And that response is, by God’s grace, Yes—a clear and unequivocal Yes to Jesus Christ. But our Yes to Jesus Christ requires us also to say No to many things because we cannot say Yes to Jesus Christ without saying No to many other lords, to many other principalities and powers, and to many other thoughts, words, and deeds.

If we say Yes to Jesus Christ we cannot avoid, ignore, or sidestep saying No. We must take saying No seriously. And let’s be frank: Many of you are here tonight because you have said No or you suspect you may have to say No again, and perhaps more insistently, and perhaps at a higher cost than ever before for you and your family.

Sure, there are some who take pleasure in saying No. They seem to enjoy it. But for many of us, saying No isn’t easy. And it’s rarely ever fun if you are, say, a parent, a pastor, or a conscientious employee, especially when everyone else is saying Yes. Saying No can go against our personality and temperament. It can cost us blood, sweat, and tears, as many of you know. But it is necessary if we are to love in truth. And it is certainly necessary if we are to love as Christ has loved us.

The church has often struggled to say No—No to many lords, No to many principalities and powers, to many thoughts, words, and deeds. Yet the church in *every age* has had to say No. Saying Yes has often been easy. But saying No has often come at a high price. The fact is nobody cared in the first century if you said: “Jesus is Lord!” You could yell it to the top of your lungs. Nobody cared. But what would get you in trouble, what could get you and your family killed, is saying: “Jesus is Lord and Caesar isn’t!” And so it’s been in many times and places.

Every major theologian of the Christian church has been compelled at one time or another to say a clear and decisive No to some false teaching or some set of “prevailing ideological or political convictions,” as the Barmen Declaration puts it, vying for recognition and acknowledgement in the church. From Athanasius to Augustine, Gregory of Nazianzus to Cyril of Alexandria, Luther to Calvin, all had to say a clear and unequivocal No—and not merely to minor, petty, esoteric theological points, but to long, persistent, and pervasive false teachings and temptations exercising influence in the church.⁷

And this effort to say No to false teachings and temptations exercising influence in the church is another

remarkable feature of the Barmen Declaration of 1934. The Barmen Declaration not only makes *affirmations* but also states what it *rejects*. After each of its six affirmations is a “*damnamus*,” a statement that begins with the phrase, “We reject the false doctrine ...” In Article Five, there are two sentences that begin with the phrase, “We reject the false doctrine ...”

What is remarkable is that until 1934 this “*damnamus*” or “we reject” claim had been lacking in modern confessions. It had been a feature of the creeds of the ancient ecumenical councils. It also appears in various confessions of the Reformation. But it is not a feature of modern creeds or confessions.⁸

Why did the *damnamus* drop out of modern creeds and confessions? It has partly to do with the Thirty Years’ War and the Treaty of Westphalia’s aims at religious tolerance. Modern churches—churches since the mid-seventeenth century—have wanted to avoid appearing too negative or antagonistic. It is understandable. Few churches want to be known as the party of No, especially in a modern pluralistic culture. But what happens when the state or culture puts pressure on the church to conform to prevailing ideological or political convictions? What happens when the church is tempted to betray the gospel? What happens when the church must say No or otherwise betray her Lord, her charter, or reason for being?

Arthur Cochrane was an eyewitness to the birth of the Confessing Church in Germany from 1935 to 1937. He later taught at the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary in Iowa from 1948 to 1971. In 1962, he published a book, *The Church’s Confession Under Hitler*, that made a deep impression on many readers. It is the story of the Confessing Church and the Barmen Declaration. I read it in my first year in seminary. It made an enormous impression on me. One passage that shook me and is seared in my memory is where Cochrane discusses the significance of Barmen and “The Nature of a Confession of Faith.” Here’s what Cochrane says:

A genuine Confession, therefore, will not merely confess, declare, and teach; implicitly or explicitly, it will also condemn, reject, and anathematize the opposing error. Accordingly, the second paragraph of each article of the Barmen Declaration begins with the words: ‘We reject the false doctrine. ...’ Naturally this condemnation, this *damnamus*, does not make pleasant reading, especially for the champions of the errors condemned. This feature of a Confession has often been lamented and denounced on the ground of its intolerance and lovelessness. The truth is that the negative exists for the sake of the positive, for the sake of definiteness and clarity. Hitler had no objections to Christians who confessed that Jesus is Lord; but he was enraged when they confessed that Jesus is Lord and

Hitler is not. Moreover, the *damnamus*, like the woes Jesus pronounced upon the Pharisees, has to be uttered just for the sake of a genuine love for erring brethren. To spare them the anathema would be neither loving nor truthful. Obviously the anathema ought not to be exercised rashly or self-righteously. But if we do not have the confidence to say, ‘We condemn,’ if we still want to indulge in innocuous, sweet-sounding affirmations that can neither give offense nor engender strong loyalties, then it is a sure sign that we are not ready to confess at all. Then we are still satisfied with registering our opinions, convictions, and sentiments. And he who wished to escape to some Hegelian synthesis above the dialectic of thesis and antithesis, of truth and error, faith and heresy, would be a spectator—unfit for the ‘either-or’ decision involved in a Confession.⁹

What Does This Have to Say to Us?

Given the false teachings and prevailing ideological and political convictions vying for recognition and acknowledgement in so many churches of America today, what does this have to say to us as Presbyterians? What does it have to say to those of us who have taken vows to live under the authority of Holy Scripture and to be guided by the historic and officially adopted confessions of our church, and who are now being asked to endorse—and who may soon be required to endorse—thoughts, words, and deeds that contradict the plain teachings of Scripture and our confessions? I believe what it says is clear.

We must say No. We cannot endorse, sanction, or bless any thought, word, or deed, any identity, orientation, or relationship we please. Karl Barth reminds us: “A thing is blessed when it is authorized and empowered, with a definite promise of success.”¹⁰ Having taken vows to live under the authority of Scripture and to be guided by our confessions, we have no authority, no right, nor reason to bless, sanction, or endorse what God has not blessed, sanctioned, or endorsed. We are bound to the Word. We cannot betray our vows. Our conscience is captive to the Word of God. We cannot betray our conscience. We must say No. And the Board of *Theology Matters* and I have tried to say No as clearly and succinctly as we could on the front page of our last issue, entitled, “Keeping Our Vows: A Pledge of Presbyterian Officers.”¹¹

Yet I want *you* to know that *we know* there is a lot more that needs to be said. We are just getting started. We have not yet made sufficiently clear how our No exists for the sake of God’s Yes. We have not yet made sufficiently clear how our No exists or should exist *primarily*—as Cochrane, Barth, and the Confessing Church remind us—for the sake of an infinitely larger, louder, more definitive and decisive Yes!¹²

We have not yet sufficiently understood God’s Yes to us in creating us male and female. Yet we know after doing

so he said it was not just good but “very good.” How’s that for a Yes to our creatureliness? And the very first thing he said was *not* good was “for man to be alone.”

We have not yet sufficiently understood God’s Yes to us in the statement, “And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed” (Gen. 2:25). They “were *not* ashamed.” Yet there are many people today—many young people—who *are* ashamed of their creatureliness—their God-given bodies and biology—because their minds have been poisoned by prevailing ideological and political convictions. We have not yet sufficiently understood or appreciated much less been able to explain the *significance* of being created as “beings in encounter,” beings in relationship, the “difficulty” and “promise,” the “need and problem and fulfillment” of having a “true counterpart” who is clearly and demonstrably *other* than ourselves, and why being male and female is “the basic form of humanity” and why this basic form of encounter is so important, as Karl Barth argues, if we are to understand *anything* about being created in the image of God.¹³

Theology Matters has published many articles about marriage the last three decades. They are still worth reading. But we want and need to understand the gift of marriage better—better in light of God’s covenant with Israel—better in light of Christ and his church. We want to understand better God’s Yes to us in marriage because there is a life-giving Yes in all God’s promises and commands. Even the Ten Commandments do not begin with No, as the Reformed tradition has always insisted. They are not primarily negative or a bunch of Thou shalt nots. The Ten Commandments begin with God’s Yes! “I AM the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage” (Ex. 20:2)). The Ten Commandments begin with a word of freedom and promise that finds its fulfillment in Jesus Christ. And so it is with all God’s promises and commands.

The theme of this conference is: “The Gates of Hell Shall Not Prevail Against It: Standing on Christ’s Promises to His Church.” We have begun and will continue to talk about Christ’s promises to His church. But Paul makes a key point about God’s promises when he says: “For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why we utter the Amen through him, to the glory of God” (2 Cor. 1:20). “All the promises of God *find* their Yes in him.”

The word *find* is important. We are still learning how “All the promises of God *find* their Yes in him.” We have a lot more to learn. And we are still learning how to say No for the sake of God’s Yes. There’s still much we do not know. But this much we do know: Our Lord Jesus said, “From the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male and female.’ ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and cleave unto to his wife, and the

two shall become one flesh.’ ... What therefore God has joined together, let no man put asunder” (Mark 10:6–9).

Whatever else can or should be drawn from this our Lord’s teaching, this much is clear: Being created male and female was God’s idea, not ours. So is the gift, promise, and blessing of marriage between a man and a woman. Indeed, God takes marriage between a man and a woman so seriously that he devoted an entire commandment to preserving it and setting a hedge around it. So, to insist not only that we *may* but that we *must* affirm, sanction, endorse, or bless any number of sexual identities, orientations, or relationships, or any that anyone identifies with at any time, is to deny not only the clear and unambiguous teaching of Scripture and our Confessions. It is to deny the basic form, structure, and determination of our humanity. And to it, we can only say No.

I mentioned Athanasius earlier. His opponents told him, “You’re making a mountain out of mole hill. Besides, the whole world is against you, Athanasius.” To which he replied, “Then I will be ‘Athanasius against the world,’” Athanasius *contra mundum*. An so he was. Yet today even modern Christians say of Athanasius: “It is his glory that he did not move with the times; it is his reward that he now remains when those times, as all times do, have moved away.”¹⁴ May it be so for us.

¹ The phrase, “fruit of repentance,” appears only in Matthew’s and Luke’s Gospel.

² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960) III.3.2. Hereafter cited *Institutes*; *Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets*, trans. John Owen (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1846), 2:60 (Joel 2:13); *Institutes* I.5.3.

³ Many modern evangelists and apologists start with sin or the wrath of God according to the so-called “Roman Road,” that is, according to the Epistle to the Romans, supposedly. But Romans does not begin with sin or the wrath of God. Paul mentions the gospel five times in the first seventeen verses of Romans before he talks about the wrath of God.

⁴ Calvin, *Institutes* III.3ff, “Few distinctions in theology and pastoral counseling are more important than that discussed by Calvin in Book Three of the *Institutes*, between what he calls ‘legal repentance’ and ‘evangelical repentance’ in his critique of the medieval sacrament of penance. Legal repentance is the view that says, “Repent, and IF you repent you will be forgiven!” as though God our Father has to be conditioned into being gracious. ...” James B. Torrance, “Christ In Our Place” in *A Passion For Christ* (Lenoir: PLC Publications, 1999), 34.

⁵ Calvin, *Institutes* III.3.1.

⁶ In Book III of his *Institutes*, Calvin treats sanctification first in chapters 1–10 and then justification in chapters 11–18. At the pivot point, he refers to justification and sanctification as a “double grace” or “*duplex gratiae*” *Institutes* III.11.1.

⁷ Yet saying No for Barth presupposed God’s Yes. See “The Yes Hidden in Barth’s No to Brunner: The First Commandment as a Theological Axiom” in George Hunsinger, *Evangelical, Catholic, and Reformed: Doctrinal Essays on Barth and Related Themes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 85–105.

Earlier we sang, “He breaks the power of reigning sin; He sets the prisoners free.” He *does* break the power of reigning sin and set the prisoner free. But the way He usually does it is by giving his people the power to say No.

So, brothers and sisters, my prayer for you is that you will receive and live from the power of repentance that Calvin talks about. *I pray that you will experience the glorious, liberating, miraculous, healing, life-giving power of saying No!*—No, to the godless fetters of this world. No, to bondage. No, to what the Bible and our Confessions call sin. And may our “yes be yes” and our “no be no.”

But may our No be for the sake of God’s Yes. For the sake of the Gospel, let us not be defined primarily by what we are against but rather than what we are *for*, not by what we hate but by what we *love*. Let the world know that God’s No does not exist for its own sake, but for the sake of his Yes to us in Jesus Christ. “For all the promises of God find their Yes in him.”

This address was delivered on Oct. 9, 2024, at Theology Matters’ fourth conference at Providence Presbyterian Church, Hilton Head Island, South Carolina.

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⁸ This is why Dietrich Bonhoeffer claims: “The modern ecumenical councils are anything but councils, because the word ‘heresy’ has been stricken from their vocabulary.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Christologie” in *Gesammelte Schriften* (Munich: Kaiser Verlag, 1966), 3:206.

⁹ Arthur C. Cochrane, *The Church’s Confession Under Hitler* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962), 211–212. Cochrane here paraphrases what Karl Barth elaborates in the *Church Dogmatics* I/2:628–632. “If the Yes does not in some way contain the No, it will not be the Yes of a confession” (631).

¹⁰ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/1:170.

¹¹ “Keeping Our Vows: A Pledge of Presbyterian Officers” *Theology Matters* 30:3 (Summer) 2024:1.

¹² “It is true that in the task or the concern of the community we are dealing with a Yes, which includes a No. But since it is identical with Jesus Christ, it is predominantly, decisively, originally and definitively a Yes and not a No. It is not a Yes which is limited, constricted, conditioned and therefore weakened or called in question by a No. ... If what it has to represent has to be a No, this cannot be its first and last, let alone its one true word. It can only be an intervening and parenthetical word transcended by the absolutely primary Yes. Whatever else may come between, the morning and the mid-day and the evening of the work of the community must always be unconditionally bright” Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV.3.2:797–798.

¹³ Before treating “Man and Woman” in the *Church Dogmatics* III/4:116–240, Barth elaborates “The Basic Form of Humanity” and discusses the basic determination of humanity as man and woman and why it is important under the rubric, “Humanity as Likeness and Hope” in *Church Dogmatics* III/2:285–324.

¹⁴ C.S. Lewis, Introduction to Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1946), 9.

For the Next Generation

By John P. Burgess

As I end my seventh decade of life, I find myself taking stock again of who I am. As with any life, there have been high points and low ones, moments of success and of failure. I have long outlived my father, who died of a sudden heart attack at age forty-eight, when I was nineteen years old. I was blessed with a mother who lived to be ninety-three and was lovingly devoted to her children and grandchildren. I don't always understand why I am wired the way I am; I sometimes wonder how my life would have been different if I had been six foot one instead of five foot six. My wife has been my loyal friend and partner, and we have three daughters, each with her particular gifts and struggles.

Who am I? It was a question that gnawed at the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, as he sat in a Nazi prison. In his letters and papers that were smuggled to the outside, he struggles to understand what God is doing, where God is in the midst of Hitler's mad war, Nazi eradication of the Jews, and a docile, disoriented church. In a poem not long before the Nazis hanged him, Bonhoeffer wrote of how others saw him as brave and confident, although he inside felt "restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage, struggling for breath." "Who am I?" he asks, "This or the other? Am I one person today, and tomorrow another? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine." And then, after all that self-searching, Bonhoeffer nevertheless declares, "Whoever I am, thou knowest, O God, I am thine."

Who am I? Who are we, Presbyterians—and, specifically, members of the PCUSA—at the beginning of the twenty-first century? Are we a self-confident denomination committed to social justice and making the world a better place? Or are we deeply anxious inside, because our membership numbers have declined 57 years in a row, from 4.2 million in 1967 to barely 1.1 million today, as though we are in free fall? We can point to vital congregations proclaiming God's good news and caring for the poor and oppressed, but in my part of the country two-thirds of the churches can no longer afford an installed minister. Who are we, really? The one, or the other? Today, these lonely questions mock us who are Presbyterian.

The theme of our conference is, "The Gates of Hell Shall Not Prevail against It: Standing on Christ's Promises to His Church." Like Bonhoeffer, we Presbyterians know that whatever our doubts and fears about the Presbyterian Church (USA), we belong to God. The

human institution that is the PCUSA may someday pass away, but God will never allow the church of Jesus Christ to die. But in the time that we still have as Presbyterians, of whatever stripe—PCUSA, ECO, EPC, PCA, OPC—God has laid a special responsibility on us. God, I believe, has given us Presbyterians certain gifts on behalf of the church universal. It is time for us to take stock of what God has given us and of who we are, in order to pass on to the next generation whatever has been good and pure and excellent about our church.

Let me begin, however, in a different place. Over the past decade, I have been studying a Russian religious philosopher by the name of Pavel Florensky. Florensky lived and worked during an extraordinarily creative historical period known as the Russian Silver Age.¹

Pavel Florensky

Born in 1882 in what is now Azerbaijan, he went as a young man to Moscow to study at the country's premier university. He could have had a brilliant career as a mathematician. But God, as they say, had other plans. Sometime in his early 20s, Florensky underwent a religious conversion. He abandoned mathematics and became an Orthodox priest and professor. His treatises on Orthodox worship, iconography, and doctrine would be groundbreaking. But in 1933, Stalin's secret police arrested him and falsely accused him of counter-revolutionary activity. He was sentenced to ten years in the gulag, first in Russia's Far East and then on a lonely island in Russia's White Sea, fewer than sixty miles from the Arctic Circle. In 1937, at age fifty-one, he was taken back to the Russian mainland, where he was shot. The pit into which his body was dumped has never been found.

Soon after his conversion to Christianity, Florensky married Anna Giatsintova. The couple lived in the small town of Sergiev Posad, where Russia's greatest monastery is located. Florensky taught at its theological academy. They would have five children—three boys (Vasilii, Kirill, and Mikhail), and two girls (Olga and Maria). Living conditions were difficult. Food was scarce, the Bolsheviks closed the theological academy where Florensky taught, and persecution of the church accelerated. Although often away from home, Florensky was a devoted father. He loved to take the children on walks into the surrounding countryside, and he encouraged each child's intellectual creativity and

growth. Indeed, each turned out to have remarkable talent. In adulthood, Vasilii became a geologist; Kirill, a planetary scientist; Olga, a botanist; Maria, a chemist; and Mikhail, a specialist in drilling oil wells.

After his arrest and imprisonment, Florensky was able to have only one visit from Anna and the three younger children. But the family was allowed to correspond. Florensky could write one letter per month; Anna could write more often and occasionally could send a small care package. After the fall of communism and the Soviet Union in 1991, the letters were collected and published under the title, *All My Thoughts Are about You*. Although Florensky had to be cautious about what he wrote—all the letters went through a censor, and he did not want to endanger the family by describing the dire conditions in the camp—he did not hesitate to offer practical life advice to Anna and each child. As for Bonhoeffer, prison became for Florensky an opportunity to think about who he was and what he wanted to pass on to others while he still had time.

Three Themes Dominate

Three themes dominate in Florensky's correspondence: He wants each member of the family to know the family's unique heritage; to become familiar with humanity's great cultural achievements; and to spend as much time as possible in the natural world. Florensky himself had been profoundly shaped by these three factors. In researching his ancestry, he learned that he had roots not only in Russia, but also in Asia Minor and perhaps even in North Africa. Each tie to the past, he believed, had shaped his personality. The fact that a great-grandfather had been a priest was for him another important part of the family legacy, as were his father's and grandfather's scientific interests.

As for great culture, Florensky had grown up hearing his mother play Mozart and Beethoven on the family piano. Later, he came to love Bach's music. He writes about delighting in the very sound of beautiful poetry, such as that of Russia's great Alexander Pushkin. After Florensky's conversion, Russia's great Orthodox heritage—its ancient cathedrals and historic icons—deeply touched him, and he worked to preserve them from Bolshevik desecration, seeing them as national treasures. But he also wanted to learn about other cultures, especially those of ancient Egypt and Greece and of Russia's indigenous tribal peoples.

Equally important to Florensky was his encounter with the wonders of creation. As a child, he had accompanied his father on expeditions into the wilds of the Caucasus. In his memoirs, he writes about his amazement at nature's surprising phenomena: "An attraction to the mysterious lived within me. ... The mysterious concen-

trated itself in mushrooms, ferns, lichens, mosses, algae—in general, in all those created things that lie close to the boundary of life, to the boundary between the animal and the plant kingdoms." Later in life, Florensky regularly sought solace in the natural world. Even in his letters from the gulag, he takes time to describe the remarkable colors of the northern lights or the play of the sun's rays on the grey sea. He especially loved looking into the deep blue color of a clear sky.

Now, in prison, thousands of miles from his family, Florensky longs to pass on his life experience to his children. In his letters, he expresses regret that he had not given them the time they deserved when he was still with them. He promises that if he ever gets out of prison, he will devote himself entirely to them. He wants each child to have a good, fulfilling life. As he writes in a letter to his son Vasilii, "I want you to have as much joy as one can on earth." Florensky uses his correspondence to encourage each child to be guided by the three factors that had come to mean so much to him: family heritage, great works of human culture, and wonder in creation.

Florensky was convinced that God entrusts each family with a unique calling. In a Testament that he left for his children prior to his arrest, Florensky directed them to collect all that they could of family "portraits, autographs, letters, manuscripts and published essays." In learning about those who have gone before us, we learn who we are. Florensky believed that his own family's calling was to spiritual, intellectual work. He hoped that each generation would include a son who would serve as a priest, a calling that both his grandfather and his father had rejected, but that Florensky had accepted. Other family members would honor the family's calling by entering professions, as did each of his children, in which they could think freely about God and his world. "Thinking," he wrote, "is God's gift and requires you to get out of yourself. ... Thinking is the guarantor of spiritual freedom." In this way, Florensky hoped that his children would not submit to communist ideology, although he did not say so directly.

In his Testament to his children, Florensky had written, "The most important thing, what I am asking of you is, above all, that you commemorate the Lord and walk before him. ... Everything else ... is secondary. Never forget this." He asks that on the day of his death, the children receive the Eucharist—and that they receive it as often as possible afterwards. Later, from the gulag, Florensky is unable to speak directly about religious faith—because of the prison censor, he would have had to write the word "God" with a small g, which for him would have been an act of desecration. But he does not give up; he develops a kind of code by which to speak to the family about ultimate, spiritual matters.

When Florensky writes, “All my thoughts are about you,” a phrase that repeats itself throughout the correspondence, he is assuring the family that he is praying for them. When he asks his children to look at the “whole” of things, he is alluding to the God who unites all of reality. Another religious allusion occurs in a letter to his daughter Olga, where Florensky writes, “What I want above all is that you cultivate in yourself a vital attitude toward life, and that you be able to perceive reality symbolically.” Avoiding religious language that a prison censor might strike out, Florensky explains that a symbol reveals what is “higher” in what is “here and now.” He refers to the eighteenth-century German poet Goethe, hoping that Olga will remember that, for Goethe, every created thing, if we have eyes to see, opens us to, and participates in, the divine. In another letter, he asks Olga to “think clearly,” an allusion again to the family’s calling to spiritual-intellectual work.

Florensky’s prison correspondence regularly lifts up the second foundation that for him anchors a good, joyful life; an appreciation of what is best—most true, most beautiful—in human culture. Because his family’s calling is spiritual and intellectual, he wants each of his children to play an instrument, learn a foreign language, and become familiar with great literature and poetry. He recommends, in particular, works that elevate rather than trouble the human spirit—and, therefore, he prefers Bach and Mozart to the more emotional and sometimes darker moods of Beethoven or Tchaikovsky. Mathematics and physics, he continues, help train the mind to think clearly. Reading history broadens our appreciation of the great achievements of cultures other than our own.

When Florensky senses that his wife has become spiritually and physically exhausted in caring for the family without his help—finding food during a time of famine, providing for their education, and helping them through adolescent struggles—he offers words that were surely meant for them as well: “It is possible and necessary to fight off [this exhaustion]. Be sure to read something good, listen to music, look at paintings and drawings. Fill your life with those things that are most worthwhile.” Or, as he writes Olga, “Learn to acquire the best of what humanity has brought forth.”

The third foundation for life—taking wonder in God’s creation—is equally prominent in Florensky’s correspondence. “Use the spring and the summer,” he tells Anna, “to see more of the forest, meadows, flowers, clouds. All this is the best that life has to offer, and it calms a person more than anything else does. And for the little one too [his son Mikhail] ... nature is the best education.” When Florensky’s son Vasilii and his wife Natalia have their first child, Florensky writes that he would like the boy to spend the entire summer in Sergiev

Posad, the family hometown. There, he will “be closer to nature.” Because, in Florensky’s thinking, a baby’s first perceptions of the world shape its personality, he hopes that Vasilii and Natalia will take their son outdoors as much as possible. Encountering flowers, plants, water, sky, clouds, and the dawn will cultivate in him a sense of wonder, even at an early age.

In his Testament to his children, Florensky had advised, “When you feel down, look at the stars or at the azure of the afternoon [sky]. When you are sad, when others offend you, when things do not go your way, when spiritual turmoil comes over you, go out into the air and stand alone with the sky. Then your soul will calm itself.” The symbolic way of thinking that he asked Olga to develop would help each child to see the natural world as a window into God’s glory. In one letter home, Florensky sent drawings of different kinds of seaweed he had been studying near the prison camp. His grandson would later write that these sketches, some executed in striking watercolors, are “an invitation to take delight in the mystery of the created world. ... [They] draw us into unmediated communion with the mystery of Nature. Through the organic forms of our lower, created world streams [divine] Light.”

Faithfulness to his family’s particular calling, appreciation of human culture, and wonder in the creation—Florensky saw it as his responsibility to pass these things on to the next generation. He believes that his children, perhaps all children, need these foundations in order to know God, to serve others, and to live well. Florensky challenges me to ask, Have I passed on these foundations to my children? I am no longer young, and they now live in different parts of the country. Is there anything I can still do to point them to God, to help them cultivate a vital faith in Jesus Christ? But now let me shift the question. What about those of us gathered here at this conference? What about us Presbyterians as a church? What are we responsible to pass on to the next generation? What do we wish to leave as our legacy? What are the foundations that have sustained us and that we hope will sustain our church into the future? Is there any good that we can still do, as membership numbers plummet and disagreements tear our church apart? The gates of hell will not prevail against God’s church, and surely God wishes to use us, weak and imperfect as we are, to help defend it.

Perhaps Florensky can be our guide. Yes, he was Russian, we are American. He was Orthodox, we are Reformed. He lived a century ago, our time and place are completely different. He died for his faith, we still enjoy many freedoms. But like Florensky, we have something valuable—indeed, invaluable—to care for. God has graced us with certain insights, traditions, and

forms of life together for the sake of the gospel, and he asks us to be good stewards of what he has given us, perhaps especially in this time in which the Presbyterian Church seems so weak and irrelevant.

A Unique Calling of Presbyterians

Florensky spoke of his family's unique calling. I would like to ask about the unique calling of the Presbyterian Church. Florensky identified great achievements of human culture that he wanted his children to know. Which Reformed classics of art, music, and literature are we called to guard? Florensky wanted the next generation to experience God's glory in the creation. Calvin called nature the theatre of God's glory. Now it is time to ask whether we have been true to our heritage, and how will we pass it on.

Few of us would argue that Presbyterianism is the only way of being Christian. But while we share much with other Christians, we do have a unique identity. What is not always so clear is how to define it. One common response is our representative form of government and the role of ruling elders, whom we ordain. Another approach is found in the PCUSA Form of Government, which lifts up certain theological themes. Here we read that central to our tradition "is the affirmation of the majesty, holiness, and providence of God who creates, sustains, rules, and redeems the world in the freedom of sovereign righteousness and love." Four other great themes follow: that God elects people to service and salvation, that we live with one another in covenantal fellowship, that we exercise faithful stewardship of God's creation, and that we work for social justice.

The Reformed theologian Brian Gerrish has argued that Calvin's theology can be summed up as "grace and gratitude." Everything begins with God's unmerited goodness to us—the gift of life, the gift of salvation—and we respond with thankfulness as we worship and serve God. Other scholars have argued that what makes the Reformed tradition distinctive is its doctrine of predestination or its attention to sanctification and the means by which we grow in the Christian life.

Each of these definitions has value. The Reformed tradition has been a rich family conversation with common theological commitments as well as points of debate and even disagreement. Indeed, one of the characteristics of the Reformed tradition has been a reluctance to reduce the faith to a list of doctrines or principles but rather to insist that the church is responsible to discern ever anew what God is asking of us in a particular time and place. The great Swiss Reformed theologian Karl Barth said that the church is, above all, a "listening church."

Let me propose, then, that our distinctive family calling as Reformed Presbyterians is to listen to God as he speaks a living Word to us in Jesus Christ. God is free to speak a Word that is new to us, that we have not anticipated, that comes to us from outside of us. Yet, we believe that this new Word will be consistent with the one Word that God has already spoken decisively in Jesus Christ. Moreover, we will hear God's new Word rightly only if we allow Scripture and the church's great confessions to train our ears. From a Reformed perspective, every church member is responsible to be a Bible-reader, to care about the church's theology, and to learn from others as they read Scripture and reflect on its witness to Christ. While each person has to listen for him- or herself, God also asks us to listen together in order to hear what God is saying to us together, as the church.

The first thing that we read about God in the book of Genesis is that he speaks. By speaking, he brings a world into being: light and dark, heaven and earth, waters and dry land, sun and moon, plants and animals, and human beings, male and female. The First Letter of John tells us of "that which was from the beginning, which we have heard," namely, Jesus Christ, who speaks. The last book of the Bible, the Book of Revelation, opens with the living, resurrected Christ saying to John, "I am the Alpha and the Omega." At the end of the book, Christ declares, "Surely, I am coming soon." So, a God who keeps speaking to his people and who keeps asking them to listen—that, I believe, is the particular insight that Reformed Christians will share with other Christians and their churches.

Florensky asked his children to learn all that they could about their ancestors. We Presbyterians believe that God asks us to represent to the church universal that Scripture is foundational to all we do. The Bible teaches us not only how Abraham, Moses, and Elijah heard God speaking to them once upon a time long ago, but also how God's Word to Abraham, Moses, and Elijah is still God's Word to us in Jesus Christ. God says to Abraham, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you"—and Jesus declares, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." Christ still calls us to leave the old behind and follow him. Moses asks God his name, and God replies, "I am who I am"—and Jesus says, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am." The "I am who I am" still declares, "Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age." God speaks to Elijah in a still small voice—and the resurrected Jesus quietly says to his confused disciples, "Peace be with you." The peace of Christ, which passes all understanding, still keeps our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus? Whatever God has promised his people in the past is his promise for us in

the present. The God who once spoke is still speaking to his people in and through the Scriptures.

God Asks Us to Offer

Florensky asked his children to become familiar with the greatest achievements of human culture. Similarly, we Presbyterians believe that God asks us to offer the church universal the greatest achievements of our Reformed tradition. I think especially of the confessions of faith that have been so important to Christians in the Reformed tradition. Their words point us to the Word that God still speaks to us in Jesus Christ. Think of the opening lines of the Heidelberg Catechism: “What is your only comfort in life and in death? That I belong—body and soul, in life and in death—not to myself but to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ. ... He protects me so well that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head.” Recall the first question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism: “What is the chief end of man? Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.” Or the first thesis of the Theological Declaration of Barmen: “Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and obey in life and in death.” And just as these Reformed confessions have a Word for the church universal, so too they point us to, and build upon, the confessions that we have received from the church universal, especially the Nicene and Apostles’ Creeds.

We could add classic statements of the faith from great Reformed teachers: John Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Karl Barth’s *Church Dogmatics*, or, as a guide to the spiritual life, John Baillie’s *A Diary of Private Prayer*. We will ask our pastors to learn from these works not only in seminary but also in their years of ministry. We will ensure that church members know something about the ideas and insights of these great Reformed confessions and teachers. God has entrusted us Presbyterians with a precious inheritance. We are responsible to care for it as faithfully as Eastern Orthodox believers do for their precious icons, such as Andrei Rublev’s famous Trinity, or as Roman Catholics do for their places of pilgrimage, such as Lourdes, France.

Florensky wanted his children to grow up with a sense of wonder in creation. Our Reformed tradition has sometimes put more emphasis on hearing God’s Word in Scripture than on seeing God’s glory in nature. But we too have a legacy of delight and awe in the natural world, and we will reclaim it. Calvin believed that Scripture itself teaches us to seek God’s truth and goodness in all that God has created. Especially the Psalms, says Calvin, “incite us to praise God, to pray to Him, to meditate on His works to the end that we love Him, fear, honor, and glorify Him.” Think of Psalm 19: “The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the

firmament proclaims his handiwork.”² Or Psalm 148: “Praise him, sun and moon, praise him all you shining stars. ... Praise the Lord ... fire and hail, snow and frost, stormy wind fulfilling his command. Mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars. Beasts and all cattle, creeping things and flying birds. ... Praise the Lord.” Or Psalm 104: “O Lord, how manifest are thy works. In wisdom hast thou made them all.”

Perhaps no Reformed theologian better captured this sensitivity to nature than the great eighteenth-century New England preacher and philosopher Jonathan Edwards. As a young man, Edwards was fascinated with flying spiders and their “wondrous and curious works.” Observing how they playfully spin their light silvery webs high in the treetops, he concluded, “Hence the exuberant goodness of the Creator, who hath not only provided for all the necessities, but also for the pleasure and recreation of ... even the insects.”³ As one scholar has written, “[For Edwards] all of created reality is permeated with clues to divine truths, if we can but remove the scales from our eyes and see them.”⁴ Or we might think of the great American naturalist John Muir, who was raised in a strict Calvinist family. The biblical language that he memorized as a child helped him later speak of America’s natural wonders. At Yosemite Valley, he declared, we are present at “Creation just beginning, the morning stars ‘still singing together and all the children of God shouting for joy.’”⁵

Let us, then, take stock. Inspired by Pavel Florensky’s letters to his children, I have asked: Who are we as Presbyterians at the beginning of the twentieth century, and what has God entrusted to us to hand on to the next generation? I have answered: Our special calling as Reformed Christians is to remind the church universal that God is a living God who is still speaking to his people. He asks us to listen. Moreover, God has entrusted us with three invaluable resources for listening well: the Scriptures, as they set forth God’s living Word in Jesus Christ; the classic statements of the Reformed faith, as they listen to Scripture; and the magnificent beauty of the creation, because it too listens to the Creator and responds to him with praise and thanksgiving.

People sometimes ask me why I am a Presbyterian. I answer: I am a Presbyterian not because I believe in the PCUSA, but rather because I believe that God has given Presbyterians a precious theological legacy. Whatever you feel about General Assembly pronouncements or changes to the Book of Order, I appeal to you to join me. Help me pass on what is best about our tradition to the next generation.

This address was delivered on Oct. 9, 2024, at Theology Matters' fourth conference at Providence Presbyterian Church, Hilton Head Island, South Carolina.

¹ See John P. Burgess, *Why Read Pavel Florensky?* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2024).

² See Calvin's commentary on Psalm 19: "As soon as we acknowledge God to be the supreme Architect, who has erected the beauteous fabric of the universe, our minds must necessarily be ravished with wonder at his infinite goodness, wisdom, and power."

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³ "The Spider Letter," in *A Jonathan Edwards Reader*, ed. John E. Smith, Harry S. Stout, and Kenneth P. Minkema (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 5.

⁴ *A Jonathan Edwards Reader*, xii.

⁵ As quoted in Bruce V. Foltz, *The Noetics of Nature: Environmental Philosophy and the Holy Beauty of the Visible* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013).

A Firm Foundation

By Lorenzo R. Small

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do men say that the Son of man is?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jona! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ. Matthew 16:13–20

There has been and continues to be a considerable amount of talk about churches dying. And this has spawned work aimed at helping church's die well, as well as work focused on breathing new life into declining churches.

I have recently started to question this language, and even more so when I consider this text. I have been wrestling with the question, "Do churches die?" This evening, I want us to consider this possibility: Maybe it is not that a church dies but rather that at some point in a congregation's life it stops being the church.

What I mean by this statement is that at some point in the life of that church something else became its foundation. Or stated this way, something else became its rock and, thus, a slow decent of *unusefulness* to God, to God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, subsequently ensued. Unfortunately, the list of things other than Jesus

Christ that congregations allow to become their foundation, their reason for existence, is long. Often this list includes their history, their heritage, their facilities, their endowments, varying agendas, programs, denominational loyalties, and so on. O how many congregations have allowed these things to become primary only to come to realize that these things will not sustain them, and that the foundation these things offer is all too flimsy. And we know that anything built upon a shaky foundation will not stand the test of time. So, with these comments in mind, I want to share three important observations from our text.

First, It Was Not Coincidental that Jesus Asked this Question in Caesarea Philippi

"Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" (Matt. 16:13). In Jesus's day, Caesarea Philippi was a significant and bustling city located at the foot of Mount Hermon, known for its religious and cultural diversity. Originally a center for the worship of the Greek god Pan, the city was home to a variety of temples and shrines dedicated to various deities, reflecting a mix of pagan traditions. Caesarea Philippi would not have been an easy place to claim allegiance to the true God, the God of our Lord Jesus the Christ. And it certainly would not have been friendly to individuals claiming Jesus as Lord.

I can only imagine the temptation in such a place to temper the message of Christ. There would have been temptations to find ways to harmonize Christ's claim with the claims of all the other gods. In a place like this I imagine the majority would have been okay with generalized god-talk. But they would not have been as comfortable with talk about Jesus. Yet it was in the place of competing gods and religious decadence that Jesus

raises this critical question—as if to say to his disciples, “Who will it be and what will it be? Will it be them or me? What they say or what I say?”

And make no mistake about it, Jesus is still posing this question, and we are constantly answering by the choices we make as individuals and collectively as the church. And when our answers lead anyone to any conclusion about Jesus other than him being the Christ, the Son of the living God, we answer wrong. Who do you say that I am? Do our answers, our theology, our allegiances, our activity lead us and others to conclude that we answer like Peter and in doing so are established upon a firm foundation? Brothers and sisters, we are not far removed from the setting of Caesarea Philippi.

“Now Moses was faithful in all God's house as a servant, to testify to the things that were to be spoken later, but Christ is faithful over God's house as a son. And we are his house, if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope” (Heb 3:5-6). “But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent” (Rev 2:4-5).

Second, To Be the Church We Must Be Sure in Our Profession of Faith

“And they said, ‘Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.’ He said to them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Simon Peter replied, ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God. And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church”’ (Matt. 16: 14–18a).

I want each of us to seriously consider our view of Jesus and what informs and/or has shaped that view, whether it is scripture or some other source. The rock that Jesus assures Peter that his church will be built upon is Peter's profession that he is the Christ, the Son of the living God. This remains the rock!

We may not be sure about many things scripturally, but we must be sure about who Jesus is. We cannot and we must not waver on this point. How others see Jesus should have zero bearing upon our profession of faith. Though down through the history of man some saw him as a lunatic, some a charlatan, some nothing more than a good man, some a good moral example, and others not real at all, we know him to be the Christ, the Son of the

living God. We know him to be the lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world. We know him to be the one who died on a hill called Calvary. We know him to be the one who rose on the third day. We know him to be the one who has ascended into heaven and is seated on the right hand of God the Father Almighty. We know him to be the way, the truth and the life. We know him to be the one who one day will return in all his glory for his church. And we know these things to be true not because we say so but because scripture declares it as so and by God's Holy Spirit, we know scripture to be true.

To be the church, we must be sure, we must be resolute, in our profession of faith for only then do we find ourselves established upon a firm foundation. Brothers and sisters, Jesus is asking us, “Who do you say that I am?” (Matt. 16:13) “You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am” (John 13:13). “You know that when you were pagans you were led astray to mute idols, however you were led. Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking in the Spirit of God ever says ‘Jesus is accursed!’ and no one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except in the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor 12:2-3).

Third, The Church Is Not Dying. It Never Will Die Nor Can It

“And the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” (Matt. 16:18b). Buildings may close. Ministries may struggle to thrive. Resources may dwindle, but the church of our Lord and Savior Jesus the Christ is alive and well and will remain so. Let us never confuse what we build to be that which Christ, alone has built. “And on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” Confusion may abound but the church will stand. Divisions may grow wider, but the church will stand. Buildings may close and resources may dwindle but the church will stand. Pastors may fall and congregations may shrink but the church will stand. Bad theology and doctrine may abound, but the church will still stand. It's influence in the public square may wane, but the church will stand. We Presbyterians may never be what we once were, but the church will stand! “And on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” No, the church is not dying. It never will nor can it for it is built upon a firm foundation. The question we are left with is this, “Are we on the firm foundation?” In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

This sermon was delivered on Oct. 8, 2024, at Theology Matters' fourth conference at Providence Presbyterian Church, Hilton Head Island, South Carolina.

The Reverend Lorenzo R. Small, Sr. is Lead Pastor of First Presbyterian Church, Battle Creek, Michigan.

The Institute for Theological Education

Theology Matters has established The Institute for Theological Education. Our goal is to equip the next generation of pastors and congregational leaders for Presbyterian and other Christian congregations. We seek to provide theological instruction that is biblical and from the mainstream of the Reformed tradition, and we begin by offering three programs:

1. A Master of Arts in Reformed Theology in partnership with the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary (for more details, see below);
2. A continuing education program that offers seminars and retreats for pastors, elders, teachers, and other congregational leaders; and
3. An adult education program that offers courses, lectures, and seminars to all interested in the subject matter, whether for academic credit, a certificate in theological studies, or as auditors.

Master of Arts in Reformed Theology

In August 2023, Theology Matters and the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary launched a Master of Arts in Reformed Theology. We have had two strong cohorts, and we are beginning to recruit a third. Focusing on classic texts and practices valued by the Reformed tradition, this program offers instruction from pastor-scholars whose knowledge has been tested in the academy and significant pastoral ministry. The M.A. in Reformed Theology is a fully accredited, 36-credit degree offered in a hybrid format that includes both face-to-face and online learning. In-person instruction will be held at Providence Presbyterian Church, Hilton Head Island, South Carolina.

Required Courses

Introduction to the Reformed Tradition
Interpretation of the Old Testament in the Reformed Tradition
Interpretation of the New Testament in the Reformed Tradition
Reformed Theology I
Reformed Theology II
Capstone Project in Reformed Theology

Elective Courses

Early & Medieval Church History
Reformation & Modern Church History
Presbyterian History and Confessions
American Puritanism through Edwards
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Dr. Jeffrey Bullock, President
University of Dubuque & Theological Seminary

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