

Unauthorized distribution or dissemination of this article is strictly prohibited. The copyright for this content is held exclusively by Everyday God-talk, Office of Theology and Worship, A Corp, PC(USA). You can access this on our Everyday God-talk blog (<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/every-day-god-talk>).

22 October 2023 (Sunday before Reformation Sunday)

“We’re Not Christians. We’re Presbyterians.”

In 1992 in the small rural town of Aledo in western Illinois, the town where musical artists Margo Price and Suzy Bogguss were born, a child born in Jersey City, New Jersey, and baptized in a Hispanic congregation in Hoboken, New Jersey, was entering the first grade of Apollo Elementary, the local public school.

During recess on the playground, some of the girls in her class gathered and began to get to know each other. Because the town of Aledo had about 3,500 people who supported seventeen different congregations of seventeen different branches of Christianity, the group of first grade girls began to share which church their family belonged to. As they went around the circle, there was a Methodist, a variety of Baptists, a Lutheran, an Evangelical Free Church, a Roman Catholic, and several girls in the Christian Church Disciples of Christ.

When the sharing came around to the girl from New Jersey, she said confidently,

“We’re **Not** Christians. We’re Presbyterians.”

The other girls were amazed. They had never met a non-Christian in Aledo, Illinois. Their town was still in 1992 a tiny fragment of Christendom that once upon a time covered the entire middle west of America. Some of them went home and told their parents that there was a new girl at school who was **not** a Christian. A girl named Wendy told her parents and the story came around to us that Laura Elizabeth Cathey, our daughter, was the first non-Christian to enroll in Apollo Elementary School that anyone could ever remember.

Next Sunday is Reformation Sunday, the day that Presbyterians, Lutherans, and other Protestants remember the great Reformation of western Christianity in the 1500s, an era over five hundred years ago when, according to a growing number of scholars, what we call “the modern world” began before the Enlightenment of the 1600 and 1700s.

In preparation for Reformation Sunday next week, I am proclaiming good news today. We heard good news in our scriptures from the prophet Isaiah about the downfall of tyrants. And in the letter to the Ephesians, a part of that ancient collection of letters attributed to Paul the Apostle which include the very earliest Christian texts that even predate the Gospels.

Being Presbyterian is a way of life. It is made up of the habits of life of Protestant human beings, being people who have something to Pro-test, something to dissent about. Presbyterians and many other Protestants, when we are true to our calling, resist the debasement of Christianity. And in this nation, Christianity is often debased into mere outward conformity to outdated White Anglo-Saxon conventions of God, country, family, and celebrations of abundance for the top 10% of income earners under global capitalism while much of the world and a growing majority in America languish in debt and anxiety.

In part this sermon was inspired by another sermon, one that was preached by President Cynthia Campbell of McCormick Seminary when she opened that academic year one fall with a sermon on what does it mean to be, not just believe, as Presbyterians. Today I have summed it up in six habits leading to a conclusion about Presbyterian convictions or statements of faith.

- 1. (Habit 1) To be Presbyterian is to embrace education, learning, critical thinking, research, the arts, and human quests for the beauty of holiness.**

Presbyterians are people who engage in education for a wide public audience. They are big readers and teach others how to read closely, carefully, and critically. Over the years I have met many public-school teachers who are Presbyterians, people who love to teach and learn having become members or having grown up in Presbyterian and other Reformed or Calvinist congregations.

After the Reformation spread to Scotland, schools to teach reading and writing were established throughout the land so that each person could learn to read the Bible on their own rather than depending on the Roman Church to tell them what was in the Bible. This literacy campaign that began in the 1500's bore fruit in the Scottish literary renaissance of the 1700's when in France and other nations, people began to read books by authors like the philosopher David Hume, the poet Robert Burns, and the Scottish historians who invented global history and the history of law.

To read, understand, and interpret the Bible for yourself in community with other readers, you need to be able to read this library of ancient sacred texts, and you need to read some other books, not just the Bible, to understand it in its own linguistic, historical, and poetic worlds.

Presbyterians are founders of colleges, universities, seminaries: here in the Midwest, Monmouth College in western Illinois was one of the very first colleges in N. America to admit women as undergraduates. The College of Wooster in Ohio, Macalister College in St. Paul, Minnesota where they fly the United Nations flag rather than the American flag over their campus, McCormick Seminary, and other Presbyterian church-related institutions all have storied histories linking them to progressive causes and movements.

I remember the philosopher George Abernathy taught us at Davidson College in N. Carolina to take a more pragmatic and positive view of the vast sea of evangelicals, fundamentalists, and right-wing churches around our college.

“Let them attract people from secular America to the Christian faith. Let us educate the persons they attract so that their minds are free of fundamentalism and exclusivism, free to make up their own minds about what truly matters.”

(Habit 2) To be Presbyterian is to embrace the pluralism of Protestants and of Christianity.

To be Presbyterian is to be a global-minded Protestant who is open to learning from the vast diversity of global Christianity.

For nine years I had an extraordinary colleague in Prof. Ogbu Kalu, a Nigerian historian of Pentecostalism and Christian missions in Africa, and a Presbyterian Ruling Elder who taught at McCormick Seminary. When the great economic recession surprised many in 2008 and the Seminary began looking for ways to downsize its budget and sell off some of its properties, Prof. Kalu's response was to call the seminary to prayer. He showed up at 8:00 AM in his office on campus, to pray with students, faculty, and staff concerned about what the future held. Every challenge the seminary faced could be looked at from a monetary, secular point of view. Prof. Kalu reminded us that we were a *theological* institution and that there was more to making history than Wall Street and the Federal Reserve. His deeply African Christian piety was brought to bear on all the issues facing us, reminding his colleagues that we were in living contact with a more give life-renewing power than all the banks where our endowment was invested.

(Habit 3) to be Presbyterian is to testify to God as the power to transform the world into a new reality, a reality that goes beyond the violent,

inequitable, wasteful, and climate disrupting age that has emerged in our modern times.

For Presbyterians God means the power to transform the human soul into the image of Christ who is the image God. But God wants more than the renewal of our individual souls. In the words of Nicholas Wolterstorff, to be Presbyterian is to be engaged in world-formative Christianity. Our God aims to renew all of society, all of creation, all dimensions of our lives. Presbyterians care about much more than only our congregations, or only our denomination, or people like us.

In lands where the Presbyterian Church has made a difference, one discovers surprising episodes in the quest for social justice. The United States didn't outlaw slavery until 1863, amid a bloody civil war. The British empire didn't outlaw slavery until 1834. In Scotland where the national church has been Presbyterian since 1560, slavery was outlawed by court order in 1777.

One of the Scottish judges, Henry Kames, had already rejected the claim that "Africans and blacks were inherently inferior to whites." "Who can say," he wrote, "what kind of society they might produce, if they had the occasion to exercise their powers of freedom, as European whites had?"ⁱ

In the history of this congregation, many examples come to mind of Presbyterian witness to world-formative Christianity.

When the very first Parliament of the World's Religions was convened in Chicago on September 11, 1893, representatives of many religions and forms of Christianity were welcomed by Rev John Henry Barrows, pastor of this congregation. Rev Barrows was already engaged with the social gospel movement that protested the inequalities of unregulated capitalism and wage slave urbanization in the late 1800s. He hoped that if the religions of the world came to Chicago to present their beliefs and practices, and listened to Christian speakers present the social gospel, they would return to their lands to make the twentieth century into "the Christian century." I have taken some of our students at McCormick to the Newberry Library where they could read letters by Rev Barrows sent to religious leaders in many different nations inviting them to Chicago. The Parliament process of convening all the world's religions to bring religious wisdom to bear on global challenges that he helped to found with others is still at work one hundred thirty years later.

(Habit 4) To be Presbyterian is to live generously with our time, creativity, and wealth as gifts of God given to bless others so that our lives become the compassionate heart of God in the world.

Presbyterians in America are a philanthropic people. As a child I recall how my parents took ten percent of their income every year, regardless of whether my father's mechanical contracting firm was doing well or not, regardless of how little or how much my mother was paid as a teacher. and committed it to the life and mission of their congregation and denomination.

When I was on sabbatical in Jerusalem in 2011 and visited one of my Palestinian students from the Near East School of Theology in Beirut in the city of Nablus on the West Bank and attended his Anglican Palestinian congregation, I was surprised to discover all the hymn books in the pews had been given by a Presbyterian church in Atlanta. And when we just look around this beautiful sanctuary, we are reminded of the generosity of Presbyterians who have gone before us and call us to be a generous people in our times.

Presbyterians resonant with the words of John Wesley, who taught his tiny bands of Anglican Methodists working to renew the Church of England and spread the Good News around the world:

“Make all you can, save all you can, give all you can.”

Or in the words of the Irish band U2: ***“You’ve got to give it away.”***

(Habit 5) To be Presbyterian is to believe in the power and authority of Bible study to replace the rule of the church by fathers, bishops, cardinals, and popes.

Beginning with the city of Zürich, Switzerland in the first generation of the Reformation in the 1500s and with the Catholic priest Zwingli, who became a reformer as important as Luther in Germany, our Protestant tradition’s response to the Roman Catholic system of governing the church with a hierarchy of fathers, is to put the Bible in the hands of everyone who comes within the orbit of a congregation, or a church-related institution. And invite everyone to read, study, question, think critically about the wealth of symbols, metaphors, parables, stories, characters, plots, and visions in the Bible. For we are convinced this ancient collection of sacred texts is the vehicle of God’s living, powerful, creative word to renew all dimensions of church, society, civilization, and our very lives in the depths of our being.

(Habit 6). To be Presbyterian is to look for the activity of God and participate in it beyond the borders of denomination, nation, and religion.

Every church member, every Presbyterian, every fellow traveler of First Presbyterian Church, everyone who feels deep in your heart, “I still haven’t found what or who I’m looking for,” should draft a personal statement of faith and disbelief, a Credo, a “This I believe” and “This I don’t believe.” Sum up for yourself the convictions that emerge from the life of being part of this congregation and the long traditions of her faith that are rooted in the scriptures, creeds, and prayers that we speak into being on Sunday.

I will close with one example, a credo I wrote for my students in a course on “modern Christian thought” at Elmhurst College in 2017. I encourage you to write your own before next Sunday, Reformation Sunday October 29. One to three sentences are a very good beginning.

I believe in God who is in the origins of all imagination, creativity, and discovery. God's active presence makes all things (physical, mental, spiritual) very good, and blesses them with freedom, growth, maturity, and autonomy. God's creativity and provision for all things dwells among us humbly, unobtrusively, and with compassion for our struggles in existence. God proposes ideal aims for persons and communities to become "created Co-creators" with God in God's world. God's redemptive purposes include all things, material, biological, mental, and spiritual. Whether we affirm faith, unbelief, or wonder at the mystery of life, God is the living, empowering reality who believes in us.

God is creative in an evolving world whose future remains open in freedom. From out of alienated humanity, God called the people of ancient Israel, the Jews, to be faithful witnesses of God's covenant, justice, and mercy for all creation. In the story of God's journeys with Israel, we learn the ways and character of God as loving, just, compassionate, and liberating. Despite centuries of dispossession and persecution, God is faithful still to God's people, the Jews. From their story and living witness, we learn how to be human in the company of God. From the Jews, we Gentiles received the Scriptures, promises, and wisdom of God for the living of our days.

I believe in Jesus Christ, a faithful Jew from Nazareth, who lived under Roman occupation and proclaimed the coming of God's rule in the world. Jesus was fully human like us, the one who existed fully for the sake of God and others in freedom. Jesus was a healer, exorcist, teacher, and Jewish patriot who created a new community of followers to invite others to welcome and practice God's rule in the world. Rejected by the Jerusalem authorities and executed by the Romans, Jesus' life in God was resurrected in the table fellowship of his followers who spread the good news of his life, death, and resurrection across the world. In Jesus, God and God's ways become most transparent for me and our community called "Church." Jesus calls us to live in God fully as Christ fully lives in God, to renew the image of God within our broken lives, and to become Christ's agents of redemption in the world. In Jesus, our sins are forgiven, our wounds are healed, our lives are restored to become God's "created Co- creators."

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the sovereign giver of life who heals and renews all things in wholeness. The Spirit is present in all events of creativity, evolution, transformation, revolution, and community that bonds God's creatures together in goodness. The Spirit has traveled with God's covenant people, the Jews, in all

ages. The Holy Spirit blesses the Christian community with the dangerous memory of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. In the table fellowship of the Lord's Supper and the baptism of believers and their children, God's Spirit makes and keeps human life more humane in the image of Jesus. The Spirit witnesses to God's past, present and future activity in nature, history, and society. God's Spirit baptizes us into the hope of God's redemption of all things from evil, brokenness, and alienation. The Spirit is at work in all religions, cultures, traditions, and peoples to call all humanity to the vocation of "created Co-creators" and caretakers of God's creation. In life and death, I hope in Christ's faithful presence by the Spirit to renew us in God's image for everlasting life in God's new cosmos.

Write your own. Before next Sunday. Bring a copy to church. Share it if you are willing in the offering plate. Let's have something to protest about. Amen.

ⁱ Arthur Herman, *How the Scots Invented the Modern World*, p. 104.