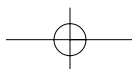
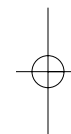
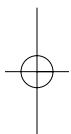


# On Being *Presbyterian*



# On Being *Presbyterian*

*Our* **BELIEFS, PRACTICES, and STORIES**

SEAN MICHAEL LUCAS



P U B L I S H I N G

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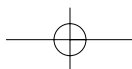
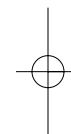
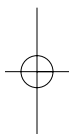
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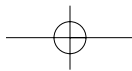
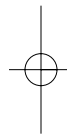
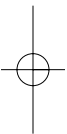
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To Sara

*for joining me on this journey*





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## Preface

THE IMPETUS FOR THIS PROJECT came from a larger historical work in which I have been engaged for over three years now, tentatively titled *For a Continuing Church: Conservative Dissent in the Presbyterian Church in the United States, 1934–1974*. That larger work focuses on the conservative movement within the southern Presbyterian church that led to the formation of the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), the denomination of which I am a part. That work could be viewed as a type of historical archeology; in it, I attempt to seek out the lineaments of the “conservative Presbyterian mind” by uncovering many of the bones of its history in the subterranean layers of Presbyterian newspapers and old personal files, church session records, and General Assembly minutes. As I have been doing this work, the questions that I have kept in the forefront of my mind are: How did the PCA come to be the way it currently is? What is the connection between the way the conservative movement in the old southern Presbyterian church developed and the way the PCA lives and breathes as a church of God doing kingdom business today?

These historical questions have led me to a more pressing question which I have faced as a teaching elder in the PCA: Do conservative Presbyterian churches, as represented in my denomination, embrace their Presbyterian identity? Or do other ideas, practices, and narratives serve to shape them? One way to read the history of the PCA, which I will explore more fully in my larger historical argument, is a movement, by fits and starts, from an essentially conservative evangelical, or even fundamentalist, identity to one that is more distinctively Presbyterian. In other words, one could read the

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history of the PCA as an attempt to answer the question: What does it mean to be a (conservative) Presbyterian in the postmodern age?

It is no wonder that conservative Presbyterians wrestle with this issue today. The past thirty years, which coincide with the whole of the PCA's existence thus far, have not been friendly to denominations of any stripe. On the one side is the extreme hemorrhaging of the old-line Protestant denominations. And on the other side is the rapid growth of nondenominational or loosely affiliated churches. Nowhere is this contrast better illustrated than in Louisville, Kentucky, where I lived for several years. Louisville is the home of the Presbyterian Church (USA) headquarters, with its bloated bureaucracy and public hand-wringing over membership losses. But it is also the home of one of the largest nondenominational churches in America, Southeast Christian Church, with a membership of over twenty-two thousand; on Easter Sunday in 2003, Southeast drew over thirty-five thousand attendees, dwarfing the attendance of all the old-line Protestant churches in the city put together.

This trend toward nondenominationalism has produced several responses. From within old-line Protestantism, there have been a number of books seeking to shore up denominational identity. In the late 1980s, for example, Lilly Endowment Inc., sponsored a series of six books, called *The Re-forming Tradition*, which sought to address the old-line Protestant decline as it played out within the PC (USA). More recently, the PC (USA) publishing house has offered books such as *To Be a Presbyterian* (1996), *What Unites Presbyterians: Common Ground for Troubled Times* (1997), *Presbyterians: A Spiritual Journey* (2000), *Being Presbyterian in the Bible Belt* (2000), and *This We Believe: Eight Truths Presbyterians Affirm* (2002). Still, the church loses members at an astonishing rate. In other denominations, such as the Southern Baptist Convention, this search for identity has been pronounced. Two books titled *Why I Am a Baptist* were published within a year of each other by rival groups within that denomination, each presenting a different vision of Baptist identity. Likewise, the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod

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recently published *Why I Am a Lutheran* (2004) in an effort to explain to insiders and outsiders what Lutheranism is all about.

Within conservative Presbyterianism, there have been differing responses. The PCA, for example, spent several years developing a strategic plan for the denomination, which was finally presented at the 2003 General Assembly. However, it is not clear that the plan has widely impacted denominational life outside the church's offices in Atlanta. At the local level, a number of PCA churches leave "Presbyterian" out of their name, for fear of being confused with the much more theologically progressive PC (USA). This move has the by-product of making PCA churches look and feel more like nondenominational churches. Others re-traditionalize conservative Presbyterians by emphasizing their difference with mainstream evangelicalism to such a degree that "evangelical" becomes a dirty word. Still others, both within and outside the PCA, claim that being Reformed is not enough, leading to revisions of Presbyterian worship and doctrine in directions suggested more by Vatican II and postliberal theology than by John Calvin, the Westminster Assembly, or even American Presbyterian history. Hence, the quest for a conservative Presbyterian identity has either moved *toward*, *away from*, or *beyond* evangelicalism, especially as represented in its nondenominational or para-church forms.

The question of identity becomes particularly pressing on the local level, as people from other Protestant traditions join a conservative Presbyterian church. The common story for many PCA members is that they were raised in baptistic churches, came to Christ there or in other venues, came to understand "the doctrines of grace," and found those doctrines taught clearly in a PCA church, which they then joined. Yet many of our church members, and even some officers, do not have a solid understanding of what it means to be Presbyterian. In exchanging one church for another, they have not yet learned the narratives, distinctives, and practices of their new spiritual home. As a result, our members often find themselves somewhat at a loss to explain to their friends and families why they belong to a Presbyterian church and why their friends should come and join their church as well.

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This book is meant, then, as a primer on Presbyterian identity. It is not written for specialists or scholars; it is written for church members, ministerial candidates, ruling elders, and, especially, potential Presbyterians. This is not a polemical work promoting a particular point of view in areas where conservative Presbyterians have legitimate differences of opinion (for example, in the area of worship styles). Rather, I intend to stick fairly closely to the Bible, PCA constitutional documents, and official position papers in laying out what Presbyterians believe, do, and say about themselves. In the “For Further Reading” sections, I will list books that represent a wider-range of perspectives and allow the reader to explore issues more deeply on his or her own. And since this book is meant to be useful for new members’ classes as well as for Sunday school or officer training venues, I have provided questions for thought and review at the end of each chapter. In addition, individual class workbooks and teacher’s PowerPoint slides can be downloaded for free from my Web site, [www.seanmichaellucas.com](http://www.seanmichaellucas.com).

I also do not intend to maximize the differences between Presbyterians and other evangelicals. As I see it, the label “evangelical” means to communicate a certain “gospel-oriented” attitude or style; evangelicals recognize the world-historical significance of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for their lives and they long for others to enjoy communion with him. This recognition that the gospel of Jesus changes everything lends a certain style to the ministry of “evangelical” churches, regardless of confessional stance or label used. Presbyterians are evangelicals in that we have a gospel orientation which expresses itself in our preaching, witnessing, and life together. That being said, as Presbyterians, we have some perspectives and practices that are different from other evangelicals; we also have a story that is part of the “evangelical” story, but distinct as well. Recognizing the differences will help in understanding what it means to be Presbyterian.

No one ever makes an important journey alone. I am no exception. My parents, Steve and Susan Lucas, are also now members of a PCA congregation, having come through their own journey to this place.

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Though we did not start out Presbyterian, I am thankful for their love for the triune God and his Word, leading us all on this journey, though by different paths. I am also grateful for the support of my parents-in-law, Ron and Phyllis Young, who are not Presbyterian but who remind us of the love of Christ and the larger communion of the saints.

Important also have been those friends who have provided encouragement along the way. Steve Nichols, my dear friend from seminary, has been part of this journey as well. D. G. Hart, my mentor at Westminster Theological Seminary, taught me to love the Presbyterian stories. Bruce Keisling supported my work as I went through deep waters. Shawn Slate, Jonathan Medlock, and John Roberts all lived out Presbyterianism with and for me. My friends and colleagues at Covenant Theological Seminary have taught me about grace-centered Presbyterianism; it has been a delight to be here. Wayne Sparkman, director of the PCA Historical Center, lent me a hand often in the course of writing. I am grateful to Bryan Chapell, D. G. Hart, Robert Peterson, and Michael Williams, who read parts of this book in its early stages and gave valuable feedback.

I thank those churches that have been willing to interact with this material. In this regard, I especially thank my friends at Community Presbyterian Church (PCA), Louisville, Kentucky, where this project had its first incarnation, and The Covenant Presbyterian Church (PCA), St. Louis, Missouri, whose interaction led to a refinement of the material. I have been blessed to serve both of these churches as well as to learn Presbyterianism at the feet of two fine churchmen and pastors, David Dively and George Robertson.

In God's grace, my family worships within the bounds of the PCA. With deep gratitude, this book is dedicated to my wife, Sara, who told me when we first were married not to leave her behind in my intellectual and spiritual travels, but always to make sure we walked side by side. It was a wise charge, and, by God's grace, we have walked this way together. What she may not realize is that in God's providence I could not have walked this way without her. Our four covenant children—Samuel, Elizabeth, Andrew, and Benjamin—have joined us in this journey, memorizing catechisms, learning hymns from the Trin-

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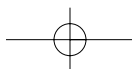
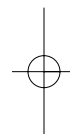
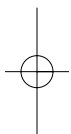
ity and RUF Hymnals, singing psalms from the Trinity Psalter, and participating in the life of the visible church. It is my prayer that our life together will lead them to teach their own children about the beliefs, practices, and stories that we as Presbyterians hold dear—especially the graceful gospel of our Lord Jesus—

that the next generation might know [it],  
the children yet unborn,  
and arise and tell [it] to their children  
so that they should set their hope in God. (Ps. 78:6–7a)

P R E F A C E

## Abbreviations

BCO	Presbyterian Church in America, Book of Church Order
<i>Inst.</i>	John Calvin, <i>Institutes of the Christian Religion</i> , ed. J. T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960).
LC	Westminster Larger Catechism
PCA	Presbyterian Church in America
PC (USA)	Presbyterian Church (United States of America)
PCUS	Presbyterian Church in the United States
OPC	Orthodox Presbyterian Church
SC	Westminster Shorter Catechism
WCF	Westminster Confession of Faith





## Introduction: Presbyterian Identity in the Postmodern Age

WHEN YOU THINK ABOUT WHO YOU ARE, what comes to mind? If you are like me, you could come up with a number of descriptors. For example, I am a son, raised in a typical American, upper-middle class family: my parents had two kids; we lived in the suburbs; my dad worked in cities; and my mom stayed at home with us. Because of my dad's work, we moved around a bit, mainly up and down the northeast corridor between New York City and Washington, D. C. (though my marriage license notes that my residency was Los Angeles County, California, when I got married). I am a husband and a father of four children. I am a pastor with a scholarly bent. I am a historian with a pastoral calling. I became a Christian when I was a teen, was a fundamentalist Baptist, but am now a Presbyterian. I am a writer. I am a voracious reader whose favorite authors include Mark Twain and Wendell Berry. I am a gardener. I am a sports fan, cheering mainly for teams from the state of Indiana. My favorite sport is baseball, but I follow all sports fairly closely. I am a fan of Bruce Springsteen and U2, but I also like country and bluegrass music. I prefer trucks over cars or minivans and manual transmissions over automatics. I only buy Fords, but when I follow NASCAR, I cheer for drivers of Chevys, particularly Jeff Gordon.

All of these descriptors hang together in Sean Lucas; together they combine for an identity that is unique to me. Indeed, we could say that my personal identity describes "the real me," my own personality. The way this identity develops, the way I became attached to the various descriptions above, has a lot to do with the way my life has

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played out and intersected with others' lives. In other words, my *story* and my family's story have a lot to do with who I am and what I consider essential.

In addition to my story, I have done certain things and not others. In fact, certain things I do could almost be considered "rituals" because I do them with such regularity. Part of this, I am sure, has to do with being a guy. My wife and I used to laugh at the way I used to visit the same tollbooth on exit 26 of the Pennsylvania Turnpike (number eight, which was the center booth, and placed me in the proper position to get on US 1 heading north). More important practices for shaping who I am, though, must include the fact that I was an early reader; that I played baseball every spring and summer from age eight to eighteen; that my father generally purchased Fords and my father-in-law works for a Ford subsidiary; that my mom would stay up with me to watch the World Series every year; and that, from the time my parents professed faith in Christ when I was 9 or 10, I've rarely missed a Sunday worship service. Many of these *practices* have continued on with my own children and will shape their own sense of identity as they grow up.

Most important in shaping who I am have been my *beliefs*. I believe that marriage is a divine institution, that I promised to be faithful to my wife, and that divorce is not an option for us. I believe that God is the giver of life in the womb and that children are a blessing from the Lord. I believe that, while all lawful callings are God-ordained, those who desire to be pastors desire a good calling, a calling that is chief among equals, given its importance in the household of God. I believe that history can tell us a lot about who we were, who we are now, and what we ought to do and be in the future. I believe that we hold the creation as a stewardship, that God placed us here to be producers and not simply consumers, and that hard work is good work. Other beliefs are not as important, such as: the greatest and most difficult game invented by humankind is baseball (although golf is a close second on both counts); that I will catch a lot of flack from my family if I ever buy a vehicle other than a Ford; and that people (and sports teams) from Indiana tend to be superior to those from the rest of the

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nation (as evidenced by my wife). These beliefs lead me to do certain repetitive practices, which in turn reinforce a story about who I am and to whom I belong.

When we say someone is having an “identity crisis,” we mean to say that he has become disillusioned or is experiencing dissonance within the core of who he is. Perhaps he is questioning his fundamental beliefs, his core values. Perhaps the practices that defined him are now unfulfilling or have been taken away due to sickness or loss. Perhaps he finds out that the story by which he has lived does not make sense of reality as he now knows it. Whatever the case may be, this individual will begin searching for new beliefs, practices, and stories that will provide him with a stable identity. Not to do so would classify this person as having a “breakdown,” leading to some sort of “dementia” (a form of mental insanity in which someone “lies” to himself, as in when someone goes around telling people that he is Superman). The most obvious type of identity crisis is what we call a “mid-life crisis,” in which a man who has spent fifteen or twenty years in the work force finds that the beliefs, practices, and stories he had when he was first out of college are no longer sufficient or fulfilling. And so, this individual sometimes buys a fast car, flirts with younger women, or changes careers, all in an effort to find a new identity.

One more thing about identity. Our current “postmodern” age prides itself on promoting fluid identities. In premodern or even early modern societies, identity was created by social relations and family connections (e.g., John, the oldest son to a blacksmith, is raised in the family business in which he provides horseshoes for the village in which he lives; he in turn expects to pass this trade to his son, etc.). However, in the present, due to the mobility of society, the influence of technology, and the loss of family ties even within the “nuclear” family, identities are forged rather than inherited. As a result, postmodernity loudly proclaims that it is possible to create or recreate your identity countless times. Perhaps the best contemporary example of this is the pop singer Madonna, who, over the course of twenty years, has transformed herself from a “boy toy” to a Marilyn Monroe replica to tawdry woman about town to Jewish spiritualist. The

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result of all of this identity creation is that people no longer hold core beliefs or master stories or shared practices; all that is left are identities that imitate sound-bites and thirty-second commercials, here today and gone tomorrow.

Now, why have I gone on at length about this issue of identity? And what does it have to do with “Presbyterian identity”? Those are fair questions. First, I wanted to describe “identity,” because it is one of those words that we use frequently without pausing to think about what we mean. This is particularly true when we talk about “religious identity.” But I also want us to begin to see how a particular type of identity is formed, as the confluence of *beliefs*, *practices*, and *stories*. And I needed to alert you to how, in our contemporary situation, this issue of identity is quite conflicted due to the “postmodern turn” of our society.

Above all, I want to suggest in the rest of this book that Presbyterian identity is formed through shared beliefs, practices, and stories. These three things work together to forge what one nineteenth-century Presbyterian theologian called the Presbyterian idiosyncrasies of mind.<sup>1</sup>

#### PRESBYTERIAN BELIEFS

By Presbyterian beliefs, I am referring to “doctrine.” In fact, sometimes you will hear someone refer to the fact that Presbyterians are “confessional.” What we mean by that is that Presbyterian churches summarize their beliefs in confessions of faith. As opposed to those who have a limited statement of faith or those who have a “book of confessions,” conservative Presbyterians take the Westminster Confession of Faith very seriously. Perhaps you know that conservative Presbyterian churches require their pastors, ruling elders, and deacons to subscribe to the Westminster Standards, a seventeenth-century document that contains a thirty-three-chapter confession of faith and two catechisms, one “larger” and one “shorter.” By “subscribe,” we mean that we ask our officers to claim the beliefs of the Standards as their own, as their confession of what they believe the Bible teaches. While our churches do not require church members to affirm the beliefs con-

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tained in the Westminster Standards, you should expect the preaching and teaching to conform quite closely to them for the simple reason that the officers have said in good faith that the beliefs contained in those documents are their own.

Of course, a large body of what Presbyterians believe is quite similar to beliefs of other evangelical Protestant churches. For example, conservative Presbyterians, along with other evangelical Protestants, believe in the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture, the Trinity, and the great doctrines of salvation, such as justification by faith alone, adoption, sanctification, and glorification. We also affirm together the divine-human nature of Jesus Christ, his substitutionary death on the cross, his physical resurrection from the tomb, and his ascension into heaven. All evangelical Protestants believe in the necessity of good works, an organization called the church, the reality of heaven and hell, and Jesus' eventual return in glory. As noted in the preface, that is why I think Presbyterians *are* evangelical, because we hold to the centrality of the gospel, to the way it has transformed our lives, and to a deep desire to have other lives transformed by it as well. We have this gospel in common with all who believe that they are sinners and who are trusting in Christ's blood and righteousness alone for their salvation—that is, with all who are *evangelical*.

It is important to state this simply. Too many who go under the label of "Presbyterian" or "Reformed" doubt whether other evangelicals really believe the gospel because they don't speak it with a Presbyterian accent. Such was the case with one Presbyterian denomination in the 1950s that refused to join a council of churches because its membership included Baptists and others who believed that faith preceded regeneration, rather than the other way around. As a result, these Presbyterians concluded that their evangelical brothers believed a defective gospel and hence may not be brothers after all! Such an attitude is out of bounds. While we might have differing levels of fellowship and intimacy based on theological commonality, still we have to say that all who claim Jesus as Savior and Lord are our brothers and sisters in Christ. We also should want to say that we have a great body of truth in common with all those who are followers of our Lord.

That being said, there are several beliefs—several doctrines—that distinguish Presbyterians from other evangelicals. I will be explaining them in part 1. Presbyterians tend to stress five big ideas.

First, we believe in *God's sovereignty*. In other words, God is the King who created all things, governs over every sphere of life, and works together all things for our salvation. When we pray, “Our Father who art in heaven,” we are praying to the King (in heaven) whom we have come to know as “our Father.” We didn’t deserve this relationship—far from it. Rather, this relationship is rooted in God the King’s free choice to save. As a result, Presbyterians emphasize *the priority of grace*. God’s amazing grace meets our deepest need: we are sinners who need mercy. We don’t deserve God’s mercy, but God shows it to us supremely in Jesus’ death and resurrection on behalf of sinners like us. But God doesn’t stop with saving us from his wrath; he also transforms us by his grace so that we more and more bear the image of Jesus. And this grace keeps on working to lead us safely home.

Our individual stories, which God the King is working out in our lives by his grace, connect with his one big story, which he is working out in Scripture and history. That’s what we mean, preeminently, when we use the word *covenant*. We want to say that, in Holy Scripture, God is telling us one big story of redemption, focused on one people of God, that starts in the garden of Eden in Genesis and ends in the City of God in Revelation. We sometimes use the term *covenant of grace* to describe this story. There were some differences in the way this story took place in the Old Testament and in the New. The Old Testament, we could say, was a time of promise, and the New Testament is a time of fulfillment. But even with these differences, it is all one story that focuses on one person, Jesus Christ, the Redeemer of God’s chosen people, who has inaugurated God’s reign on earth—God’s kingdom—through his death and resurrection. And this story focuses on God’s promise to meet our needs in grace through Jesus Christ—his promise to be our God and for us to be his people. This story of God’s unfolding promise leads to the establishment of his reign in this world and among his people, the church.

Presbyterians understand the *nature of the church* a little bit differently from other evangelicals. We describe the church in a number of ways: as a people shaped by the Trinity and by the gospel, but also as a people defined in terms of space, character, and marks. Above all, we rely heavily on the distinction between the church as God sees it and the church as we see it. This gives rise to the language of the “visible” and “invisible” church. As we will see, the distinction is important not only for the way it helps us reckon with a number of thorny pastoral issues—particularly the problem of “apostasy”; it also provides a solid rationale for seeing our children as members of the visible church. Rather than upholding the ideal of “regenerate church membership,” like our Baptist brothers and sisters, we believe that the church that we can see, the visible, is made up by professing adults and their children.

Because this is the case, children of professing believers ought to receive the sign of initiation into God’s visible people—baptism. That means, of course, that Presbyterians embrace a different view of *the sacraments* from baptistic fellow believers. When it comes to baptism, we believe that God’s purposes have centered on households. In Genesis 17, God made promises to Abraham as the head of a household and gave him a covenantal sign—circumcision—that extended to his entire household and sealed those promises to his posterity. In Acts, the same thing is done, except now the covenant sign is baptism: God’s promise to grant Abraham’s blessings is given to believing heads of households, and the covenantal sign is extended to all the members of the household. Presbyterians also have a different understanding of the Lord’s Supper. We believe that, for those who receive the Supper in faith, something *happens*: namely, we enjoy the presence of the Lord himself. This does not happen through a transformation of the bread and wine into something they are not. Rather, it happens through the work of God’s Spirit in lifting our eyes and hearts to heaven where Jesus is in his glory. This is probably more than what most evangelical Protestants believe; they tend to think of the Supper as simply a memorial, a time of remembering that Jesus died. We believe that, too; but we also believe that the Supper is more than that.

## PRESBYTERIAN PRACTICES

These beliefs don't stand in isolation from the rest of our lives as nice intellectual toys with which to play. Rather, these beliefs shape our practices and in turn are reinforced by those practices. When we talk about practices, what we mean are those repetitious actions through which our beliefs about God and his purpose for us are reinforced. You can think about practices as those activities which you do every day in your line of business. For example, every day when I reach my office, the first thing I do is check my e-mail. If there are any messages to which I need to respond, I do. In the midst of writing a response, the phone might ring. I always answer it the same way: "Hello, this is Sean Lucas." If there is an internal matter that comes up, I use the memo template in my word processing program to crank out my thoughts for others. I try to go down to the seminary library once a week and walk through the serials section, checking to see if there are any new journals in my field. I am sure that in your business, there are practices in which you engage every day as well. My beliefs about what my work should look like shape my practices and my practices reinforce these beliefs.

We can think about religious practices in the same way. Perhaps we can say that there are practices that we use as "we do business" with God and those which we use when "we do business" as the church. In the former, we engage with God through *practices of piety*. What we will find is that these practices of piety are profoundly tied up with corporate worship. The way we experience union and communion with God in Christ by the Spirit is through the preached Word, the sacraments, and prayer. But it does not stop there—we also move toward the world in service for others. We serve not because we can somehow earn favor with God. We serve out of profound gratitude for the grace that we have been shown by God the King. And so, these beliefs intersect with our practices of piety to shape the way we engage and are engaged by God for the sake of the world.

As we think about corporate *worship*, Presbyterians have generally held that worship is to be regulated by Scripture. What that means is



one of the hotly debated topics of our day, but at the minimum it must mean that Scripture norms the “elements” of the worship service. In the movement from being called into God’s presence to confessing our sins to hearing God’s Word and participating in God’s sacraments, we participate in the renewal of God’s covenant promises and the retelling of God’s gospel story. As a result, our beliefs deeply influence the way we worship and are reinforced by our worship practices.

Most of the time in worship, Presbyterians like to do things “decently and in order” (1 Cor. 14:40). But our penchant for orderliness really comes through as we do the business of the church. This brings us to another set of practices, which could be lumped under the heading *church government*. Because God is the King and he rules especially in the church, Presbyterians have thought quite a bit about how God’s authority is granted to the church, how it is mediated, and how it is to be used. As a result, we argue that God in Christ is King over the church and he gives elders as gifts to Christ’s church to oversee and shepherd his people. These elders are responsible not only for their own local congregations, but for all of the churches in a given geographical area. The elders gather in higher “courts” of the church—such as presbytery and General Assembly—in order to express their care for the work of the whole church.

Another aspect of church government that sets us apart is that we have a document that regulates what we as Presbyterians can and cannot do as churches. This is called the Book of Church Order (usually abbreviated BCO, which you may hear some people pronounce as “Boco”; you’ll also find that Presbyterians love acronyms and abbreviations). The BCO regulates everything from the nature of a mission church to the calling of a pastor, from the process for ordination to the process of church discipline, from the resignation of ministers to the dissolution of local churches. As elders, we try very hard in our various meetings to root everything we do in the BCO (the underlying principles of which are, in turn, rooted in the Bible). It is not unusual, when some difficult question is before a session (the local church’s body of governing elders) or presbytery, for all of the men present to consult various sections of their own copies of the BCO.

This sets us apart from many evangelical churches that have limited constitutions, which are rarely consulted. It means that we may do things a little slowly and in line with the niceties of parliamentary procedure, but we are all doing the same thing “decently and in order.” Even more, these practices reinforce our belief that we are not the kings of the church; rather, God in Christ is the King and he is ruling in our midst through his Word and Spirit. Our practices are informed by our beliefs and our beliefs are reinforced by our practices.

#### PRESBYTERIAN STORIES

As a historian, I probably lean toward believing that this may be the most important part of our Presbyterian identity. That, of course, is not true; what we believe is more important than the stories about we who believe(d). Yet the stories that we tell about ourselves provide clues for what beliefs and practices we cherish and why we cherish them. One temptation we must avoid is to conclude that the larger Presbyterian story is unimportant. Because conservative Presbyterians had to leave the old-line Presbyterian Church (USA) to form new denominations, we may think that the *really* important part of the story is that which led to the creation of our own denominations. Not only is this line of thinking terribly naïve, but it also robs us of what is rightfully ours: we are Presbyterians, and we have as much right to stand in the line of Presbyterian teaching and life that goes back to John Calvin, and beyond him to the apostles, as those who belong to the old-line Presbyterian church.

That is why the third part of this book will briefly remind us of the Presbyterian story. This is vitally important for understanding why our churches are the way they are. John Calvin, John Knox, and the Westminster divines—theologians who lived in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—directly influence the way things are done in the PCA today. Do you doubt that? Listen to any sermon preached in a PCA church and you will more than likely hear a quote from Calvin or a statement from the Westminster Standards. You will also hear thoughts from Jonathan Edwards, the eighteenth-century sometime

Presbyterian pastor, or Charles Hodge, the nineteenth-century Presbyterian theologian. Not only are old, dead Presbyterians quoted often in the PCA, but their thoughts and conflicts have shaped both the beliefs that the church holds dear and the way in which the church did and does its business of worship and government.

And then, of course, there is the entire story of how conservative Presbyterian denominations came to exist during the last century, through the heroic efforts of ministers like J. Gresham Machen and Robert G. Rayburn in the North and ruling elders like Jack Williamson, Kenneth Keyes, and Bob Cannada in the South. How our churches came into existence influences how we do things today; in the PCA, this is demonstrated in everything from our denominational “askings” from the local churches (instead of per capita taxes) to our belief that congregations control their own property for their own purposes and not for those of the denomination. We will not be able to get into all the ways in which our story shapes who we are today; that will have to await the bigger book to which I referred in the preface. But we will make a few suggestions about this and, hopefully, you will be able to think about others in your own context.

It is my prayer that this book will help to explain to you what being Presbyterian is all about—what beliefs move us, what practices shape us, what stories we tell about ourselves. In the end, the most important thing is not that your identity is Presbyterian, but that your identity is shaped by Jesus Christ. For if you put your wholehearted faith in Jesus, you are united to him and receive all the benefits of salvation: you are declared right with God, you are adopted into his family, you are set apart and are made holy in God’s sight, and you are glorified. This union with Christ is spiritual, mystical, real, and inseparable—it marks you with a *Christian* identity, as belonging to God the King by his amazing grace. It places you in the unfolding story of God’s people of promise, stretching back through the history of the church to the story of Israel. It points you forward to God’s reign finally manifested fully on earth at the end of the age. And it places you in God’s blood-bought people, the church. That identity—believer united to Jesus Christ—is the most important; and if that identity is

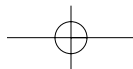
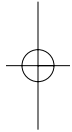
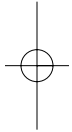
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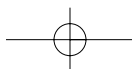
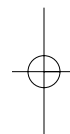
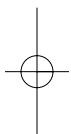
not yours, then you should speak with a friend, loved one, or pastor who can show you from Scripture how to enter into right relationship with God through faith in Jesus. You will begin a journey of faith that I hope will lead you to walk with faithful Presbyterians around the world and in your own neighborhood for God's glory.

INTRODUCTION

P A R T O N E

» *Presbyterian Beliefs*





## CHAPTER |

## God Is King: The Sovereignty of God

WHEN YOU THINK ABOUT THE PHRASE “God’s sovereignty,” what comes to mind? I asked this question of a Sunday school class recently and got a number of solid answers: omnipotence and omnipresence; maker and master planner; total and absolute control; comforting presence. All of these answers hit at significant aspects of the idea. However, I would suggest that we could sum up all of these by thinking about the word *sovereignty* itself. After all, the word derives from *sovereign*, which can denote a person who exercises supreme, permanent authority. To put it simply, when we talk about God as sovereign, we mean that God is King.

Our God is more than *a* king. Rather, our God is *the* King, the supreme King who created all things, rules and directs all things to their proper ends, and exercises his will supremely in every area of life. There are many places in Scripture that articulate this vision of God as the King, but one of the best is Daniel 4. In many ways, this is a strange chapter in Daniel; it presents itself as a kind of affidavit from Nebuchadnezzar, ruler of Babylon and conqueror of Israel and Judah. Nebuchadnezzar has a dream, which Daniel interprets for him. In the dream, God tells the king that though Nebuchadnezzar was great and his kingdom extended throughout the “known world,” he would be humbled until he learned “that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to

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whom he will” (Dan. 4:25). A year after this dream, Nebuchadnezzar boasts in his own heart over his kingdom; immediately, a voice from heaven rearticulates what Daniel had told him. The king loses his reason, is driven from other men to live with field animals, and is made to eat grass like an ox; his hair and fingernails grow long and animal-like; and he is humbled. Finally, the king “lifted [his] eyes to heaven, and [his] reason returned to [him]” and this is what he confessed:

I blessed the Most High, and praised and honored him who lives forever,

for his dominion is an everlasting dominion,  
and his kingdom endures from generation to generation;  
all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing,  
and he does according to his will among the host of heaven  
and among the inhabitants of the earth;  
and none can stay his hand  
or say to him, “What have you done?” (Dan. 4:34–35)

God the King stands over all other kings of this world; his will is supreme and no human can contradict or challenge his desires. One hymn text puts it this way:

O Father, you are sovereign  
in all the worlds you made;  
your mighty word was spoken  
and light and life obeyed.  
Your voice commands the seasons  
and bounds the ocean’s shore,  
sets stars within their courses  
and stills the tempest’s roar.

O Father, you are sovereign  
in all affairs of man;  
no pow’rs of death or darkness  
can thwart your perfect plan.

PRESBYTERIAN BELIEFS



All chance and change transcending,  
supreme in time and space,  
you hold your trusting children  
secure in your embrace.

O Father, you are sovereign,  
the Lord of human pain,  
transmuting earthly sorrows  
to gold of heav'nly gain.  
All evil overruling,  
as none but Conqu'ror could,  
your love pursues its purpose—  
our souls' eternal good.

O Father, you are sovereign!  
We see you dimly now,  
but soon before your triumph  
earth's every knee shall bow.  
With this glad hope before us  
our faith springs up anew:  
our sovereign Lord and Savior,  
we trust and worship you!<sup>1</sup>

As this hymn teaches us, God is the King over his creation. He brought the worlds into existence by his powerful word and as the Creator has rightful claim to the creation's obedience. God is also the King over every sphere of life. He guides and directs both the macro-story—the movement of human history—and our micro-stories—each of our individual lives; everything happens in accordance with his plan. Even the pain we feel and the sorrows we know come under the King's rule. Finally, God is the King over human salvation. God the King is unfolding a story, a plan, that involves the salvation of a people for his own glory and that focuses attention on the God-Man, Jesus.

This belief that God is the King raises some difficulties; we will treat these briefly in the proper place later in this chapter. However, perhaps the greatest difficulty is existential: the way we feel about God's

rule over every part of our lives. Even Protestant saints like Jonathan Edwards struggled existentially with the reality that God is the King. In a narrative of his conversion meant to encourage his son-in-law, Aaron Burr Sr., Edwards reflected on how he had long objected to the doctrine of God's sovereignty; in fact, he said that "it used to appear like a horrible doctrine to me." Yet there came a time when he was convinced that this belief was biblical and, hence, true. Edwards was never able to give an explanation for it, save for the "extraordinary influence of God's Spirit." Yet his mind was able to "rest in it" to such a degree that this belief became "a *delightful* conviction." Edwards would go on to claim that "the doctrine of God's sovereignty has very often appeared, an exceeding pleasant, bright and sweet doctrine to me: and absolute sovereignty is what I love to ascribe to God."<sup>2</sup> Even someone like Edwards struggled to understand how God could be the King; this was not only an intellectual struggle but a profoundly *personal* one. It points up to us, I think, that this belief that God is the King is just that: a *belief* toward which we will not necessarily reason our way. Rather, it is a belief in which we must rest.

#### GOD IS THE KING OVER HIS CREATION

From the very beginning of time, God the King has been working out a story, one that focuses on manifesting his glory in his creation. Ephesians 1 tells us that God "chose us in [Christ] before the foundation of the world" and that this was "according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will" (1:3, 11). Because of passages such as these, Presbyterians believe that "God from all eternity did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass" (WCF 3.1). Right from the get-go, the issue of God's kingship over all his creatures and all their actions is joined (WCF 5.1). Is God truly sovereign from the beginning of time or is he not? Is God the one who began and who is directing human history, or are some other forces in charge?

That issue becomes particularly pressing when we talk about creation. As Presbyterians, we confess that “it pleased God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, for the manifestation of the glory of his eternal power, wisdom, and goodness, in the beginning, to create, or make of nothing, the world, and all things therein whether visible or invisible, in the space of six days; and all very good” (WCF 4.1). When we confess this, we mean several things. First, we believe that God the King created all things in the world out of nothing. God spoke all creation into being by the power of his Word and Spirit (Gen. 1:1–3; John 1:3; Heb. 1:3). Next, we also believe that God the King created for his own glory. In creation, God highlights his power, wisdom, and goodness (Rom. 1:20; Ps. 19:1). Third, we mean that God the King *was* before anything else was. Before time began, God was; in fact, God is the one who created time as well as matter. As a result, God does not depend upon his creation; rather, God’s creation depends upon him. Finally, we can say that, because God the King created, he has ownership over his creation (Ps. 24:1–2). God has rights over his creation in the same way that a painter has ownership rights over a piece of art or an author has ownership rights over his manuscript.

All of these points argue that God the Creator is King over his creation; God is the “Sovereign Lord who made the heaven, and the earth and the sea and everything in them” (Acts 4:24). As creatures, we are dependent upon God and distinct from him. Even when we pretend to live our lives independently from God and ignore his will, still God is our King and his will is our law. All humankind is responsible to God and will be judged by God; this is right because God is the Creator and King over humankind. The apostle Paul makes the point that Gentiles, who did not have the written law of God, “show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus” (Rom. 2:15–16). The upshot of God’s sovereignty over his creation is that he is both King and Judge over it.

## GOD IS THE KING OVER EVERY SPHERE OF LIFE

The question that might arise from believing that God is the King over his creation is whether or not God the King continues his involvement with it. Is God the blind watchmaker, who, having once created the world and its laws, then leaves it to run on its own? Or does God involve himself directly in the day-to-day movements of his creation?

Presbyterians believe that, in fact, God continues to exercise his role over every sphere of life. One of the ways we typically express this belief is through the idea of *providence*. We confess that

God the great Creator of all things doth uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least, by his most wise and holy providence, according to his infallible foreknowledge and the free and immutable counsel of his own will, to the praise of the glory of his wisdom, power, justice, goodness, and mercy. (WCF 5.1)

In other words, we believe that God the King is bound to and involved with his creation. The fancy theological words here are *transcendence* and *immanence*. We do believe that God is not like his creation; he is “holy” and “wholly” other; he is *transcendent*. But we also earnestly believe that God loves his creation and is near to it; he is intimately involved with it, guiding its affairs and governing his creatures; he is *immanent*. We want to say that providence has to do with four types or categories of divine activity: upholding, directing, disposing, and governing. God the King is *upholding* “the universe by the word of his power” (Heb. 1:3) in such a way that, if he were to stop doing so, the world would cease to exist. Another way of putting this is that “in him all things hold together”; in a way that we don’t really grasp, God in Christ is sustaining the world so that we live and move and have our being “in him” (Col. 1:17; Acts 17:28).

God the King is also *directing* the events of human history. Most importantly, God orchestrated human history so that “when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son” (Gal. 4:4). All of ancient

history led up to the moment of the incarnation of Jesus Christ: the preservation of the Messianic line, the administration of the old covenant and Jewish kingdom, the movement of world powers to return the Jews to Palestine, even the call for the worldwide census that brought Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem from their native Nazareth—each event was part of God’s directing of human affairs. God the King continues to fit together his larger story of salvation with our smaller life-stories in such a way that it is a grand mosaic proclaiming his glory.

Further, God the King *disposed* events to turn out a certain way in line with his perfect and secret plan. God disposed that it would be Isaac, not Ishmael; Jacob, not Esau; Moses, not Aaron who would uniquely lead his people. God disposed that Pharaoh would react in certain ways so that God would demonstrate that he alone was the true God (Ex. 4:21). In ways that we cannot fully understand, God even disposed that Adam would sin in the garden of Eden and thus begin the entire story of redemption (WCF 5.4).

Finally, God the King *governs* human beings and their actions. We can say this because Presbyterians claim that no part of God’s creation is exempt from God’s providence. It is not as though Pharaoh was under God’s control, but Adam was not; or Cyrus was under God’s control, but Augustus Caesar was not. *All* of God’s creatures are under his control. Even inanimate objects and forces are under God’s control. David sang about this in Psalm 68:

O God, when you went out before your people,  
 when you marched through the wilderness,  
 the earth quaked, the heavens poured down rain,  
 before God, the One of Sinai,  
 before God, the God of Israel.  
 Rain in abundance, O God, you shed abroad;  
 you restored your inheritance as it languished;  
 your flock found a dwelling in it;  
 in your goodness, O God, you provided for the needy.  
 (Ps. 68:7–10)

God was the one who caused the rain to replenish the land and to provide for the flocks; he is the one who controls the storms and the droughts of life. Nothing stands outside God's control.

This providential activity on God the King's part is rooted in his unerring foreknowledge and irreversible purpose. God's foreknowledge is not merely his looking down the corridor of time and seeing that something is going to happen. Rather, God's foreknowledge implies God's foreordination—God knows something is going to happen because he is the one who has determined such a thing will happen (Rom. 9:11). This foreknowledge is both exhaustive and unerring. There is simply nothing in human existence that takes God by surprise because God has purposed irreversibly that such an event would happen. As difficult as it is for us to understand, the evil that happens in our world is under God's control. Immediately, Joseph's words to his brothers should come to mind: "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today" (Gen. 50:20). In the same way, the central day in the Christian faith is one we call "Good Friday," a day in which an unmistakably evil action was used for God's glorious good purpose of saving his own. Peter himself noted this in his Pentecost sermon: "This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men" (Acts 2:23). Peter did not let the religious leaders off the hook—they had certainly done evil in crucifying the Lord of Glory; yet this happened in accordance with God's plan. And God was able to use this unmistakably evil act to bring about the ultimate good: the redemption of God's people.

One of the difficulties with understanding providence is relating God the King's governance of all things with responsible human agency. If God is sovereign, then in what sense are human actions free and, hence, morally accountable? In order to get at this, we have to step back to reaffirm that God's kingship over all his creatures is all-inclusive. Human beings cannot limit God's authority or his freedom. But even more, God's kingly authority *establishes* human existence and, hence, human choice. When God created

human beings and granted them dominion over the rest of creation, he delegated to them his authority to make decisions about creation. That delegated authority or rule did not come to an end with the fall of Adam and Eve; humans still have the authority to make those decisions and choices and to exercise rule (Ps. 8:6). Now, though, human beings must deal with an additional factor—the corruption communicated to us by virtue of our first parents’ sin. Hence, our minds are clouded by sin and our wills are bound by our own sinful self-interest. As a result, when humans make choices, not only are they limited by God’s prior delegation of authority and by his sovereign administration of his creation, but they are also limited by their own sinfulness.

There are some very practical implications that result from this broad understanding that God is King over every sphere of life. One thing we would want to say is that human history has both purpose and direction. This is certainly true for the big story that God is working out. God is guiding human history to a specific goal: the full and final salvation and liberation of his people and his creation (Rom. 8:18–30). But it is also true for our smaller stories. Events that happen to us are not purposeless, but full of meaning, granted to us from the hand of God. As a pastor friend of mine, David Dively, has well said, “God has made this moment for me and me for an eternity of these moments.” This is the case because our smaller stories are knit together by God into his larger purpose and plan to bring about glory.

Because this is God’s story, nothing happens to us by luck or chance. Indeed, one of the sins forbidden in the first commandment is “ascribing the praise of any good we either are, have, or can do, to fortune, idols, ourselves, or any other creature” (LC 105). Rather, we have the faith of the hymn writer:

Whate’er my God ordains is right:  
his holy will abideth;  
I will be still whate’er he doth,  
and follow where he guideth.

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He is my God; though dark my road,  
he holds me that I shall not fall:  
wherefore to him I leave it all.

Whate'er my God ordains is right:  
he never will deceive me;  
he leads me by the proper path;  
I know he will not leave me.  
I take, content, what he hath sent;  
his hand can turn my griefs away,  
and patiently I wait his day.

Whate'er my God ordains is right:  
though now this cup, in drinking,  
may bitter seem to my faint heart,  
I take it, all unshrinking.  
My God is true; each morn anew  
sweet comfort yet shall fill my heart,  
and pain and sorrow shall depart.

Whate'er my God ordains is right:  
here shall my stand be taken;  
though sorrow, need, or death be mine,  
yet I am not forsaken.  
My Father's care is round me there;  
he holds me that I shall not fall:  
and so to him I leave it all.<sup>3</sup>

Our loving God and Father so directs our paths that, though our road be dark, he upholds us. We can trust that the path on which he places us is the proper one, and so we can be content in his providential leading. And our only hope is in his comfort, meditated by the Spirit and the Word, reminding us that God's care will never leave us nor forsake us. Human history has a purpose and direction: it will result ultimately in the full and final salvation of us and of the church as a whole.

PRESBYTERIAN BELIEFS



Although God the King is directing our stories and his larger story for his own glory, it may not be clear to our human eyes what God is doing in the daily events of our lives or in the broader sweep of history. As God told Israel when the people prepared to enter the Promised Land: “The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law” (Deut. 29:29). It may be difficult to understand what God is doing in our lives; we may wonder whether God has a purpose in it all. We can rest certain that he does, but we may not be able to discern what that purpose is in this life. The same goes for understanding what God is doing in the larger sweep of contemporary events and recent history. It is very tempting for us to think that we can say what God meant in a particular war or in allowing the rise of a particular world leader. Stephen J. Nichols, a theologian friend of mine, once wrote a brilliant essay on the folly of attempting to name the Antichrist. Surveying church history from the early church forward, Nichols cataloged the many different suggestions that biblical students have made for who the Antichrist was, ranging from Constantine to the Pope to Ronald Reagan! Even when it comes to the study of history, some advocate a kind of “providential history” in which religious figures are divided up into righteous and unrighteous teams and the effects of their actions are granted theological significance. To be sure, we must seek to understand human motivations in the writing of history. But identifying certain events (ones we like) as “the work of God” while failing to recognize other events (ones we don’t like) as being equally God’s work ironically represents a significant misunderstanding of God’s providence. All of life is under God’s control; all of it is for the praise of his glory; but the *hows* and the *whys* may be harder to grasp in this age.

Finally, because God the King is governing every aspect of our lives, our daily work and callings are granted great significance. Our callings, our “vocations,” *are* the way God exerts his rule in this world. As a result, whether you are a housewife, a lawyer, a teacher, or a minister, what you do is vitally important in God’s scheme of things. You are extending God’s rule wherever you are, for you are a child and an

agent of God the King. Some Presbyterians argue that this means God's rule must be extended to every sphere of human existence, such as science, art, or politics. Abraham Kuyper, a Dutch Reformed theologian who founded the Free University of Amsterdam and eventually served as Prime Minister of the Netherlands, held that Presbyterian beliefs (summed up under the heading of Calvinism, after their most prominent developer, John Calvin) provided a worldview that could alone grant a coherent rationale for human endeavor. Kuyper famously expressed his belief in God's kingship over the world by proclaiming, "There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry: 'Mine!'"<sup>4</sup> He also claimed that God's sovereignty had to be expressed by "a *Science* which will not rest until it has thought out the entire cosmos; a *Religion* which cannot sit still until she has permeated every sphere of human life; and so also there must be an *Art* which, despising no single department of life adopts, into her splendid world, the whole of human life, religion included."<sup>5</sup> Kuyper suggested that Presbyterian and Reformed believers could construct a coherent "world and life view" that approached every sphere of knowledge from the standpoint of God's kingship and law. This understanding has led many Presbyterians to pursue their vocations under God's direction, seeking to extend his reign in every sphere of life.

#### GOD IS THE KING OVER HUMAN SALVATION

There is one further question that might come to mind: If God the King governs every aspect of our lives, does he also direct our stories of salvation? This is where the rubber often hits the road, for when most people talk about God's sovereignty, they particularly refer to God's right as King to save whom he will in the way he wills. The whole complex of theological words for this point—*predestination*, *election*, *foreordination*—serves as an important identity marker between Presbyterians and many other evangelicals. And yet, the truth that God is the King over human salvation flows naturally from what we have already seen: if God is the King over his creation, having own-

ership rights over what he has made; and if God is the King over every sphere of life, upholding, directing, disposing, and governing all his creatures and all their actions; then does it not follow that God demonstrates the fact he is King over his creatures by saving whomever he desires to save?

As we have already noticed, all human beings since the fall start their lives in rebellion against God. From the time of our first parents, Adam and Eve, humans have sought to live independently of God, making their own evaluations of what is good and evil. Because of this rebellion, God could rightfully damn all humans to experience his eternal wrath and justice. No one deserves salvation. The fact that anyone experiences mercy is solely because of God's grace. Not only this, but as the result of the fall, our wills are bent away from serving God. As Paul put it so memorably in Romans:

None is righteous, no, not one;  
no one understands;  
no one seeks for God. (Rom. 3:10, quoting Ps. 14)

Because no one seeks after God, and because our wills are set against God, someone outside of us needs to intervene if we are to receive divine mercy and forgiveness.

That is why Presbyterians confess that

those of mankind that are predestinated unto life, God, before the foundation of the world was laid, according to his eternal and immutable purpose, and the secret counsel and good pleasure of his will, hath chosen, in Christ, unto everlasting glory, out of his mere free grace and love, without any foresight of faith or good works, or perseverance in either of them, or any other thing in the creature, as conditions, or causes moving him thereunto: and all to the praise of his glorious grace. (WCF 3.5)

Now, that section of the Westminster Confession of Faith sounds like it was written by a lawyer. Let's see if we can break it down into more

manageable ideas. The key thought is that God the King has chosen in Christ those whom he will save for his own glory. Everything else is descriptive of the way in which God the King chose: he did it before the foundation of the world; he chose according to his own irreversible purpose and his own good pleasure; he did this out of his freedom, not because of any obligation placed upon him by the creature; and this choosing has as its end goal the praise of God's glorious grace.

Another way of putting this might be that God the King has chosen us out of his own freedom and for his own purposes. The apostle Paul, in 2 Timothy 1:8–9, made this point: “Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God, who saved us and called us to a holy calling, *not because of our works, but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the world began*” (emphasis added). Here we have many of the components of God's sovereignty in our salvation: God did the choosing in Christ out of his own freedom before the world began and not because we placed God under obligation by our works. Another straightforward place where the Bible speaks to this is Romans 8:29–30, where Paul writes that “those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.” Each of these texts claims that God is King over our salvation—he is the one who chooses us and he does so out of his own freedom.

Even further, God the King takes all the steps necessary for our salvation. As we confess, he has “foreordained all the means thereunto” (WCF 3.6). He was the one who secured the salvation of his people by sending Jesus to die on the cross and to rise on the third day from the tomb. He was the one who caused us to be born in a certain place and time. He was the one who brought us into contact with the gospel at the right time. He was the one who poured out the Holy Spirit to use his Word to call us effectively to faith in Jesus. He is the one who grants us every spiritual blessing in Jesus: justification, adoption, sanc-

tification, and the promise of glorification. If God did not do these things, no one would be saved. Truly, as the apostle John points out, “We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19).

There are those who claim that Presbyterians cannot share the gospel effectively with their neighbors because no one can know whom God has chosen. But when you think about it, this is a weak objection, because the same sovereign God who chose to save also chose the way in which to save—by neighbors sharing the gospel with their neighbors, parents teaching the gospel to their children, pastors preaching the gospel to their congregations, missionaries declaring the gospel to people groups who have never heard it. That is what the Great Commission is all about: as you go through life, make disciples. Another reason this objection does not hold weight is that, though God knows whom he has chosen, we do not. Therefore, we are called to share the gospel without distinction and with everyone we meet. The apostle Paul, on Mars Hill, declared that “the times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed” (Acts 17:30–31). This was Paul’s message everywhere he went, in the synagogue and in the marketplace, on Mars Hill and on the Temple mount. He didn’t try to discern who the “elect” were; rather, he preached the gospel to all, believing that God was calling out his own in every group of people.

To be sure, sometimes our friends get themselves wrapped around the axle trying to sort out how predestination “works.” We confess that “the doctrine of this high mystery of predestination is to be handled with special prudence and care” (WCF 3.8). Sometimes people have shipwrecked their faith because they have not been able to figure out whether their dying neighbor or their co-workers were elect. Again, this misses the point. The identities of those who were chosen before the foundation of the world are known only to *God*; what *we* know is this: “Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved” (Acts 16:31). Further, the belief that God is King in matters relating to our salvation is not meant to lead us to despair, but to assure our hearts. It should lead us to rejoicing. That is certainly the way Paul uses it in

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Romans 8. Writing to believers who were experiencing the deep “suffering of this present time,” Paul tells them that nothing can separate them from God’s love, nothing can turn God against them (8:18, 31). Why? Because, Paul writes, those whom he foreknew he also called, justified, and glorified (8:29–30). As a result, we can rejoice in the “the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord”—in him, we are more than conquerors (8:37–39).

Our rejoicing is rooted in an understanding that God as King does not *have* to save us. We, God’s creation, have rebelled against God; we seek to live independently from him; we do not seek God at all. But God sought us, sent his Son to die for us, and grants us his Spirit to turn our wills toward God. As Isaac Watts put it:

How sweet and awesome is the place  
with Christ within the doors,  
while everlasting love displays  
the choicest of her stores.

While all our hearts and all our songs  
join to admire the feast,  
each of us cries with thankful tongue,  
“Lord, why was I a guest?”

“Why was I made to hear your voice,  
and enter while there’s room,  
when thousands make a wretched choice,  
and rather starve than come?”

’Twas the same love that spread the feast  
that sweetly drew us in;  
else we had still refused to taste,  
and perished in our sin.<sup>6</sup>

Our salvation is not due to our own goodness or our own ability. Our salvation is solely the result of God’s mercy. This is undeserved

favor—this is *grace*. And it is grace rooted in God’s actions as King over his creation, working his will in providence and redemption.

»*Questions for Thought and Review*

1. Was there ever a time when you struggled with the belief that God is the King? What was the turning point in seeing this as a “delightful conviction”?
2. All evangelicals affirm that God created all things visible and invisible, but probably most have not thought about the implications to which this affirmation leads. How do the affirmations about God’s independence from his creation and his ownership over creation confirm or challenge your views of God?
3. Do you feel at times that God is distant from his creation? How does the affirmation of God’s providence comfort you in the midst of pain and struggle?
4. Why is the affirmation that “nothing stands outside God’s control” important? If there were people or forces outside God’s control, what would that do to your view of God?
5. How does “Good Friday” challenge your view of God’s control of evil? If God planned to bring the ultimate good out of such terrible evil, how does that challenge our understanding of the evil of our lives?
6. This chapter says that “God’s kingly authority establishes human existence and, hence, human choice.” How does this understanding revise the typical confusion over God’s sovereignty and human responsibility? If God did not establish human existence, how would humans make meaningful choices?
7. How does the Presbyterian commitment to God’s providential control over life provide us with confidence, assurance, and meaning as we look at our lives and human history? How do we relate our confidence that God is in control over all events in our lives with our inability to discern necessarily God’s intent in these events?

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8. In what ways do God's rights as King in your salvation encourage you in God's grace? How does this strengthen your assurance in God's care for you?
9. How would you answer a friend who claimed that Presbyterians cannot share the gospel effectively with their neighbors because no one can know whom God has chosen?

»*For Further Reading*

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