Reaching for Humility

The Scots Confession was written in 1560 by a committee of six men who all shared the same first name—John. John Knox was the foremost among them. Who was this man? Knox's biography reads more like an action hero than a church father. Though he was Scottish, instead of "Be Thou My Vision," think of the "Mission Impossible" theme song! Better yet, the motto of the Scottish clan of our dearly departed friend, Rud Turnbull, "Fortune favors the brave."

While in college, Knox felt the Lord was calling him to fight for the faith. His first job in ministry was as the bodyguard of George Wishart, a prominent Protestant preacher in Scotland. When the Holy Roman Empire charged Wishart with heresy, Knox also wanted to die as a witness. After Wishart was burned at the stake, however, Knox avenged his death by conspiring with several young men to murder the Roman Catholic cardinal responsible for his mentor's martyrdom. For his part in the plot, Knox was sold into slavery on a French ship. He was one of the galley slaves, chained to a bench and forced to row by a master's whip. Knox was revered among the slaves for his strength of body and spirit, as he labored at the oar for fellow slaves who were too exhausted and also refused to venerate a picture of the Mother Mary.

After 19 months at sea, Knox was finally freed but then had to go into exile because another queen, known as Bloody Mary, began her persecution of Protestants. In exile, Knox met another John in Geneva.

John Calvin admired John Knox as a passionate preacher. He also wrote to Knox, "I trust … you will moderate your rigor." Calvin added in the same letter, "In my younger years in the ministry, this verse never failed to temper my agitated feelings against those who were my opponents in doctrine and life: *The Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness* (2 Timothy 2:24).

It's worth noting that Calvin and Knox were the same age, yet Calvin assumed the position of the elder Apostle Paul advising the younger Timothy. This apparently did not sit well, for Knox did not "moderate his rigor" or "correct his opponents with gentleness." He continued to publish bombastic tracts that attacked nearly everyone, including the rich and powerful. His style reminds me of the 1980s mockumentary *This Is Spinal Tap*, specifically the scene when the lead guitarist is showing off his collection of instruments. He pauses at his favorite amplifier,

noting that while standard volume knobs reach a maximum of 10, this particular one is capable of going up to 11! Knox turned it up.

This history is aimed to provide a backdrop for understanding the theological argument regarding the true Kirk, the Scottish word for church. The earlier Apostles and Nicene Creeds stated a desire for a holy universal community of faith. The Scots Confession defines the "true marks," or characteristics, of this church as the proclamation of the Word and the celebration of two sacraments—baptism and communion—that were instituted by Christ and available to every person. Knox, Calvin, and other reformers were passionate about these beliefs.

However, the Scots Confession also adds the softer grace note that the true Kirk is invisible and known only to God. It's not limited to one denomination or nationality. Rather, the true church spans all time, space, and ethnicity and is greater than any other human division or barrier.

Yesterday evening, there was a remarkable rainbow stretching over Jones Ferry Road. Cars pulled over to the side to admire the colors. My oldest said, "Dad, you should mention this in your sermon about how we all looked at it together." It does preach!

We are also aware that, like in the sixteenth century, we squabble and divide, even harm and kill one another over religious disputes, instead of looking up in unified wonder. We could learn from our ancestors' insight that God is above all of us. Here, that Scottish hymn is fitting: "Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart; naught be all else to me save that thou art."

This hymn is a call for humility. Not a lowering down to the ground, as the word's Latin root (*humus*) suggests, but a rising up and a reaching toward something we can never quite touch but must trust is there. I would call this faith in the belief that the world holds together by God's mysterious grace. Therefore, our tiny and transient lives are nonetheless essential parts of the whole, and the choices we make change the shape of that whole. Love is the most powerful decision we can make, and the path to love leads through humility.

This week, poet Andrea Gibson died. They were a celebrated queer spoken word poet and activist whose deeply personal work continues to resonate worldwide. Gibson demonstrated immense love and humility, stating, "You tap into the brevity of something, and all of a sudden everything becomes more special." The objective

is not to obtain or amass but to relinquish and give. Gibson wrote, “Every good heart has lost its roof. Let the walls collapse at your feet.”

While the Scots Confession has notes of humility, I have to say that the document also erects walls. The text contains horrible language about other Christians, from Roman Catholics to Anabaptists, as well as reprehensible antisemitism. The Scots Confession also forbade women from serving as pastors. Knox and others were wrong to turn up the volume on these claims.

In 1967, the United Presbyterian Church of America, the precursor to our denomination, the Presbyterian Church (USA), acknowledged these mistakes, just as we do today, and more recent confessions correct them.

But does that mean that there is nothing to learn from the Scots Confession?

No confession is flawless, every creed has flaws, and no statement we make about God is error-free, for we, like our ancestors, are human and prone to mistakes, including those influenced by our time and place. For this reason, we have a prayer of confession as part of every worship service, a practice that goes back to Calvin’s Geneva and was taken by Knox to Scotland. To his credit, Knox admitted in the preface to the Scots Confession that the document may contain mistakes, and the authors would change their minds if proven wrong: “With all humility, we embrace the Gospel of grace, which is the food for our souls.” Gibson used another metaphor: “The break in our heart is like the hole in the flute. Sometimes it’s the place where the music comes through.”

I hope Knox, Calvin, and all the rest would appreciate that we have continued to add new confessions that offer insights into the nature of God and what it means to love. For all our differences, all our mistakes, and all our shortcomings, we can seek unity as people of faith, and humility is the path to love. The best impulse of our ancestors honored this.

Another letter has survived from Calvin to Knox. It was written after the death of Knox’s wife; Calvin had suffered the death of his beloved only two years earlier. He wrote to Knox, “Your distress for the loss of your wife justly commands my deepest sympathy. Persons of her merit are not often to be met.” Calvin let the walls of his heart down. He not only put himself in Knox’s shoes but also in Knox’s pain.

This reminds me of the Christmas message by a Scottish minister at the turn of the twentieth century, “Be pitiful, for everyone is fighting a hard battle.” By “pitiful,”

the pastor meant to be kind and compassionate. It is not always helpful to turn up the volume. But kindness, compassion, and humility are the notes of a life of faith, a heart tuned to sing grace.

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