

"In Life and in Death"

Rev. Dr. Peter Bynum

September 13, 2026

⁷We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. ⁸If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. ⁹For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living. ¹⁰Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. ¹¹For it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God." ¹²So then, each of us will be accountable to God.

(Romans 14:7-12)

In 1609, when captain Henry Hudson and his Dutch crew dropped the gangway of their ship the "Half Moon" and became the first Europeans to set foot on Manhattan Island, most of the officers and crew were carrying two documents in their baggage. The first was a Bible. The second was a pamphlet -- more specifically, a catechism, a printed series of questions and answers used to teach the basic tenets of the Christian faith.¹ It was known as the "Heidelberg Catechism," a document which is still today one of the foundational statements of Reformed Christian theology. Written in 1563, it is the most personal and intimate of our confessions.² It begins with a simple but powerful question that goes right to the heart of each and every person: "*What is your only comfort, in life and in death?*" The answer given is this: "*That I belong—body and soul, in life and in death—not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ...*"

That is old wisdom, but it is every bit as true today. In fact, in the 1980's, when a group of Presbyterians got together to write a brief, more modern statement of what we believe, the group knew that the only place for them to start that new statement was to mirror these old words. The mother of one of my good friends was a pastor on that committee in the 80's, and at her funeral last week the very first words the pastor spoke came from the opening line of *The Brief Statement of Faith*: "*In life and death, we belong to God.*"

Yesterday, at the funeral of Linda Coulter, who was a powerhouse in this church and a force in our community in the 70's and 80's, the first words in that service were the same: "*In life and in death, we belong to God.*"

It is easy, I think, to remember this truth at a funeral. It is hard to deny that we belong to God in death. It is a lot easier to forget or deny that we belong to God in the midst of life. We busy ourselves with all the things we feel like we need to do, things we want to do. And along the way we convince ourselves that we are in control. We make the decisions. We chart our paths. But then something comes along that reminds us that there are very real limits to what we can control.

This past Thursday, before the annual 9/11 commemoration ceremony at Girl Scout Rock, I had the chance to speak with some of the fire fighters from the Larchmont Fire

¹ Jack Rogers, *Presbyterian Creeds: A Guide to the Book of Confessions*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox (1991), 96.

² Rogers, 96.



Department. To mark the 25th anniversary of that fateful day, a group of retired veterans of the department had come to town to put on the uniform again and stand together with the current guys to remember and honor the fallen. I spoke with a number of them who had worked on the pile in the aftermath of the attack. One had even helped to retrieve the body of his own cousin, also a firefighter, who had been on duty when the towers fell. These are tough, steady, and committed guys, but even the strongest people recognize that there are limits to what we can control. And, at some point, everyone needs comfort in the face of grief and loss. No matter who we are, no matter what we do, the first question is the last question, and it is THE question for every day in between: *"What is your only comfort, in life and in death?"* When the chips are down, and everything else falls away, what is the thing that I can always count on? And the answer is that we belong, body and soul, in life and in death, not to ourselves, but to God.

The prophets describe this comfort with a powerful metaphor. God is like a potter, and we are clay in the potter's hands. Sometimes we forget that this is the way it is. Sometimes we get distracted about our own importance. But God never forgets, God is never distracted, and God never stops shaping us, guiding us, molding us.³ It is one of the first lessons we learn about God, that "He's got the whole world in his hands... He's got the little tiny babies in his hands.... He's got you and me, brother, in his hands... He's got you and me, sister, in his hands... He's got the whole world in his hands."⁴ We know the song, but we still forget, and we still stray.

A few decades ago a sociologist named Robert Bellah wrote a book about rugged American individualism called *Habits of the Heart*. His claim in that book was that we had become so absorbed in ourselves that everything in life was devolving into what we want, or what we think we need. He said this idea was even becoming pervasive in the church. One example he cited was an interview he had with a woman named Sheila Larson. When Bellah asked her to describe her faith, this was her answer. "It's 'Sheilaism,'" she said. "Just my own little voice... Just to try to love yourself and be gentle with yourself."⁵

We all do this. We might not realize that, as we pick and choose what we want God to be... as we take up what is easy to believe and leave the harder stuff... as we do Christian things that are convenient but avoid the parts that are hard... we might not realize that we are essentially creating our own religion that serves our own needs. But the God who knows our inner most hearts, who can count every hair on our heads, tells us through scripture very, very clearly, *"We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; [either way,] whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's."* We are clay in the potter's hands from the alpha to the omega, from the beginning to the end. He's got the whole world in his hands.

Sure, Sheilaism feels good a lot of the time. Sheilaism is comfortable. Sheilaism asks very little of us. But Sheilaism is ultimately weak. Sheilaism cannot endure days like the one we had 25 years ago. Sheilaism withers in the face of real and palpable grief. No one has ever written a song "A Mighty Fortress is our Sheila." It doesn't matter how tough we think we are, how smart we think we are, how resourceful we think we are. At the end of the day, the one thing we have that can weather any storm, overcome any tragedy, and win any

³ Jeremiah 18:1-10.

⁴ Isaiah 45:5-10.

⁵ Mark Movsesian, "You Are Not a Religion," <https://firstthings.com/you-are-not-a-religion/>. March 1, 2013.

battle is the fact that the hands of God are holding us in every moment. And when it comes for us to draw our final breath, there is really only one thing we will be able say with any certainty... and they just happen to be the same words that someone will probably say over our ashes or our casket:

"In life and in death, we belong to God."

"What is my only comfort, in life and in death? That I belong—body and soul, in life and in death—not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ..."

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**