

One New Book for the Preacher

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Isaac B. Sharp and Christian T. Iosso, eds., *Ethics in Conversation: A Festschrift in Honor of Donald W. Shriver, Jr., 13th President of Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2020)

The *Journal for Preachers* has published essays by Don Shriver over the years. Now, fittingly, the life and contributions of this parish and campus pastor, university professor, scholar in social ethics, activist, seminary president, ecumenical leader, and author come into full view in a Festschrift that will treat and tantalize ministers.

The Festschrift convenes a conversation on Christian ethics where we hear past and present Union faculty, other colleagues and friends, and Pulitzer Prize-winning Yale historian David W. Blight. Together they describe the challenges Shriver faced while leading Union for sixteen years as president from 1975 to 1991. But this is much more than a book of institutional memory. It is the story of a man who, in the words of his Yale mentor H. Richard Niebuhr, encourages all of us in the continuing “moral act of self-definition.”

Born in 1927 in Norfolk, Virginia, Shriver grew up in a segregated neighborhood and school structure. His father, holding strong “states’ rights” beliefs, opposed civil rights marches and legislation. Young Shriver’s involvement in the Presbyterian Church opened an alternative vision of Christian faith. In 1950, he was elected national moderator of the Youth Council of the Presbyterian Church, U.S. In 1951, he was elected chair of the United Christian Youth Movement, where he met Peggy Ann Leu, his future wife.

Shriver received his education at Davidson College (1951), Union Theological Seminary in Richmond (1955), and Yale University (1957), and earned a Ph.D. from Harvard in 1962. He served as pastor of Linwood Presbyterian Church in Gastonia, North Carolina, from 1956 to 59, and university minister at North Carolina State University from 1963 to 1972. The position at Raleigh morphed into a dual role in teaching, where he encouraged students to integrate theology and ethics with contemporary events. In 1972 he became professor of ethics and society at Emory University.

Shriver was invited to become Union Seminary New York’s thirteenth president in 1975. Union historian Gary Dorrien writes, “Shriver was well aware that Union was said to be in a death spiral, because Union’s inner turmoil and financial disarray were very publicly known.” The Seminary had fired its twelfth president, and the candidate first offered the thirteenth presidency “turned it down after judging the school was ungovernable.” In the mid-seventies, Union was struggling to navigate a changing church and culture after the seminary’s halcyon years of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich. In Shriver’s inaugural address, he posed the question: “How does the love of truth serve the truth of love?” This is a timeless question for ministers in every generation.

In this Festschrift, multiple angles of vision shed light on Don (and Peggy) Shriver.

Larry Rasmussen remembers how he “gave vitality to campus spiritualities the likes of which Union had not known and would not have imagined.” Cornell West mused, “Is it ironic that Donald Shriver—this son of the White South—would convene such a group of Black scholars and Christians in late twentieth century New York City?” Janet Walton describes Shriver’s encouragement for the reconfiguring of worship in James Chapel. Phyllis Tribble writes, “We remember with gratitude the striving for women during the presidency of Donald Shriver.”

An apple of gold for ministers is the essay by Dean K. Thompson, pastor and former President of Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary. In “An Unsilent Southerner and Colleagues Confront the Scourge of Racism,” Thompson captures Shriver as a model for ministers seeking to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ in today’s tumultuous culture.

During Thompson’s senior year in Richmond, he recounts a Social Ethics seminar taught by Shriver as a visiting professor. Shriver asked, “What can you do to cultivate ethical reflection in congregations?” He wanted these future ministers to encourage members to think theologically about the intersection of church and society in their communities. The visiting professor cautioned not to provide answers but rather to offer in their preaching and teaching the elements of decision-making. Thompson remembers Shriver “challenged us to yearn for a faith that equipped us for change instead of a faith that protected us from change.” He charged the class members to lead the church as a “headlight” rather than a “taillight.”

Shriver’s life journey contains many signposts for today’s minister. He lived his theology. He joined labor union members in a picket line in Gastonia. He marched in Selma in 1965. Because of his participation in the march, some Presbyterian elders attempted to have him fired from his campus ministry position at North Carolina State University.

In his first book *The Unsilent South: Prophetic Preaching in Racial Crisis*, an edited volume of sermons, he reminds preachers to be conscious of the racism in themselves.

Embarking on prophetic preaching, Shriver learned early he needed to travel this road with others. The Rev. J. Randolph “Randy” Taylor, pastor of Washington D.C.’s Church of the Pilgrims from 1956 until 1967, who became the first moderator of the reunited Presbyterian Church U.S.A. in 1983, became Shriver’s friend and partner in ministry and civil rights activism.

In *Honest Patriots: Loving a Country Enough to Remember Its Misdeeds* (2005), which won the prestigious Grawemeyer Award in Religion, Shriver focused on Germany and South Africa as models for the task of “mastering” destructive pasts. He then treated our negative treatment of African Americans and Native Americans in a call for a self-critical vision of American citizenship. He wrote, “Some Americans are learning to offer each other more honest versions of our national history than many of us were taught as children.”

In retrospect, living half of his life in the South and half in the North, Shriver continually relied on the counsel of African-American and female colleagues to navigate new challenges to the church. In our challenging moment, the faith odyssey of Don Shriver can help illuminate the preacher’s task.