

Social Witness in Generous Orthodoxy: The New Presbyterian “Study Catechism”

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THE TWENTIETH CENTURY has witnessed a number of initiatives to encourage political responsibility in the church. Each achieved a measure of success before hitting on diminishing returns. The religious socialism of the '10s and '20s in Switzerland and Germany, the American social gospel of about the same era, the worker-priest movement in postwar France, the Latin American liberation theologies of the '60s and '70s with their base communities, the black theologies of the same decades in the U.S. and Africa, and the slightly later feminist and womanist theologies in industrialized nations—these and other efforts were progressive campaigns that made a mark but did not prevail. The recurring pattern of early promise broken by arrest and eventual decline surely had causes that were various and complex. Yet these campaigns all had at least one thing in common. Each in its own way forced the church to choose between progressive politics and traditional faith. Each made it seem as though the two were mutually exclusive. Each therefore forged an unwitting alliance with its opposition, which shared the same diagnosis, only from the opposite point of view. Each failed to see that, confronted with a forced option, the church will inevitably choose not to abandon traditional faith. Equally tragically, each failed to see that the forced option between progressive politics and traditional faith is false.¹

The falsity of the option might have been plain from the existence of any number of prominent figures. Dorothy Day, William Stringfellow, Fanny Lou Hamer, Oscar Romero, André Trocmé, Marietta Jaeger, Helmut Gollwitzer, Lech Walesa, Kim Dae-jung, Ita Ford, Desmond Tutu, and not least Karl Barth are among the many twentieth-century Christians known for their progressive politics. They saw no reason to choose between their love for Jesus Christ as confessed by faith and their love for the poor and the oppressed. They had learned from initiatives for political responsibility while

¹ I do not mean to suggest that combining progressive politics with traditional faith will guarantee success, only that forcing the church to choose between them virtually guarantees failure.

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refusing the fatal choice. Traditional faith was for them not a hindrance but an incentive for progressive political change. It sustained them in struggle through their darkest hours. It was not for them something disreputable to be hidden from those in need, nor was it something to be rejected because dishonored by injustice and failure in the church. It was rather the hard-won and priceless deposit of truth that withstood every effort to discredit its relevance.

In 1998, the 210th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) adopted two new catechisms. In a church wracked by divisions over various social issues, the catechisms passed the assembly by an impressive 80/20% margin, with the drafting committee receiving a standing ovation after the vote.² Answering a questionnaire when the assembly was over, a strong majority of the delegates (60%) said they regarded the new catechisms as the most important item they had acted upon. The catechisms have since been published in a number of forms. Assisted by study-guide materials, they are slowly seeping into the life of the church, being used for confirmation classes, leadership training programs, and congregational education. They are not proposed as tests of orthodoxy, but simply as much-needed teaching tools for those who wish to use them. They can be employed flexibly and creatively in a variety of different settings. The real test will be the extent to which the catechisms are actually taken up and used.

The longer of the two documents, called *The Study Catechism*, on which this essay will concentrate, is distinctive in that it seeks to combine—in however rudimentary a form—traditional faith with progressive politics. This combination of both traditional and progressive motifs would seem to make *The Study Catechism* relatively unique in the history of Reformed catechisms and confessions, not to mention other Reformation or ecumenical symbols. The new catechism endeavors to balance concern for the church with concern for the world. Taken as a whole, it aims to be both traditional and contemporary, both evangelical and liberal, both Reformed and ecumenical. It casts a broad yet careful net in an attempt to be as inclusive with integrity as possible.

“Generous orthodoxy” might be used to sum up the balance that both catechisms seek to strike. A remark from the one theologian whose work in particular, more often than not, brought the drafting committee into unity,

² The catechisms were approved for use over a five-year period. A Consultation to evaluate the church’s experience with them has been established through the PC(USA)’s Office of Theology and Worship. The catechisms will eventually be resubmitted to the General Assembly in revised form for final approval. The currently approved documents were written by a Special Committee of the General Assembly that worked over a four-year period.

illustrates the term. We ought not to exclude anyone from our hearts and prayers, this theologian advised, but rather to embrace “all people who dwell on earth. For what God has determined concerning them is beyond our knowing except that it is no less godly than humane to wish and hope the best for them.” Although these are not always the sentiments associated with John Calvin, they appear in his work more often than commonly supposed.³ Certainly they represent the Reformed tradition at its best. When asked about the term “generous orthodoxy,” which he coined, the late Hans Frei of Yale, once commented: “Generosity without orthodoxy is nothing, but orthodoxy without generosity is worse than nothing.” The new catechisms offer the broad center of the PC(USA) the vision of a generous orthodoxy that can embrace its diversity, help to heal its wounds, and equip it for faithful service to Christ in the century that lies ahead.

Before turning to the theme of social witness, a sketch of the new catechisms will be provided, followed by some brief reflections on how catechisms have functioned in the Reformed tradition.

I. THE NEW CATECHISMS: AN OVERVIEW

The shorter of the two adopted by the 1998 General Assembly, called *The First Catechism*, aims to reach children who are nine or ten years old. With sixty short questions and answers, it surveys the biblical narrative in outline. After a short prologue, designed to draw the children in, it traces the following sequence: creation and fall, Israel as God’s covenant people, Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and the church in the power of the Holy Spirit, concluding with an explanation of the Lord’s Prayer. For the sake of simplicity in the flow of questions, the Ten Commandments, though listed, are not expounded. Elementary teachings about scripture, the sacraments, worship, and mission appear in the section on the church. For each question and answer, specific Bible verses are attached. This method is designed to help pupils gain a basic grasp of the biblical material on which the answers are based. (A similar correlation of scripture with the questions and answers of *The Study Catechism* has also been prepared.) It seemed advisable not to call this document a “children’s catechism,” since it may also be useful for some adults.

While *The First Catechism* has a narrative structure, *The Study Catechism* unpacks the basics of the Christian faith by examining the Apostles’ Creed,

³ See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 3:20, 38.

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the Ten Commandments, and the Lord's Prayer. Lengthier and more detailed than the narrative catechism, it is suitable for use with ages fourteen and up. Traditional topics like the creation of the world "out of nothing" or like Jesus Christ's Incarnation, saving death, and Resurrection receive significant attention. At the same time, more contemporary concerns like faith and science, the problem of evil, and Christianity's relation to other religions are also touched upon. Openly affirming key Reformation themes, such as justification by faith alone and the scripture principle, the catechism is "evangelical." Yet in an equally open way, social concerns, biblical criticism, modern scientific findings, and hope for the whole creation find glad affirmation as well, ensuring that the catechism is also "liberal." Finally, distinctive Reformed convictions (for example, on providence, covenant, and adoption as God's children) are balanced by a deliberate ecumenism (for example, on the Trinity, the sacraments, and "anti-supersessionism").⁴

The use of catechisms was revitalized by the Reformation. In normal Protestantism, a minister could enter the pulpit and presuppose a fully catechized congregation—a situation that prevailed for at least three hundred years. Today this level of Christian education is almost beyond imagination, at least for the PC(USA). In the continental Reformed tradition, it was common to preach throughout the year on the Heidelberg Catechism. Two services would be held each Sunday, with the evening service focussing on a question and answer from the catechism. The evening service presupposed that most people in the congregation had been through confirmation where the catechism was thoroughly studied. Sometimes, notwithstanding the Heidelberg's length, confirmands had memorized the whole thing. In the Reformed tradition's Anglo-American branch from which Presbyterian churches come, the Westminster standards were used in a similar way. Young people studied them for confirmation and instruction, sometimes memorizing The Shorter Catechism, though a preaching service directly on the Westminster standards was not as common.

Luther is the figure whose vision was formative. He and his followers had no idea what was going to happen in the dangerous period after the German Reformation took wing. Never far from his mind from one year to the next was whether he would be alive or murdered. Eventually, various theologians set out from Wittenberg to visit the local congregations. What they found was not encouraging. Luther once came across a priest who could not recite the

⁴ Like the Heidelberg Catechism (but unlike the Westminster standards), it might be mentioned, The Study Catechism gives little prominence to "predestination," thus taking a moderately Calvinistic position.

Lord's Prayer. (We think things have declined for us in the PC(USA), and they have, but there is a point we have not reached yet!) Luther revitalized the church through the catechisms. His Small Catechism, which is very simple, has lasted right down to the present day. He saw catechisms as a way of reversing the church's decline, and it worked for hundreds of years.

Luther thought that the catechism should be taught at home. He did not see the Christian household as a part of the church. He saw it as a form of the church. It was a school for faith. Parents used the catechism to teach their children around the dinner table. Note that the word *catechesis* means oral instruction, not memorization. Luther and the Reformation believed that all Christians needed a basic understanding of the Apostles' Creed, the Ten Commandments, and the Lord's Prayer. As much as anything, it was the catechisms that were responsible for the success of Protestantism. They made it possible to transmit a lively, well-informed faith from one generation to the next. When the catechisms were used as the Reformation intended, memorization was secondary to understanding.⁵ Robert Wuthnow, the Princeton sociologist of religion, has said that the biggest reason why "mainline" Protestant churches in the United States are no longer retaining their young people is that they have failed to teach them a clear, compelling set of religious beliefs. The new catechisms could contribute to reversing this contemporary decline.

"Today in all dimensions of life," Jürgen Moltmann has written, "faith is urged to prove its relevance for the changing and bettering of the world. Under the pressure to make itself useful everywhere, Christian faith no longer knows why it is faith or why it is Christian."⁶ Social relevance, as Moltmann suggests, will continue to elude a church that fails to fulfill its primary vocation as a community of faith. Christian faith that no longer knows why it is faith or why it is Christian has little to offer anyone. The halfhearted, low-commitment religion of much middle-class American church life corresponds to the safe, domesticated deity so devastatingly described by H. Richard Niebuhr: "A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross."⁷ Wrath, sin, judgment, and the cross are difficult themes that require responsible retrieval in the church today, without which there will be no

⁵ As T. F. Torrance has pointed out, in previous generations people who were brought up on The Shorter Westminster Catechism, even when not otherwise highly educated, acquired an intellectual and spiritual proficiency not easily matched by churchgoers today. See T. F. Torrance, *The School of Faith* (New York: Harper, 1959), xxix.

⁶ Jürgen Moltmann, *Umkehr zur Zukunft* (Gütersloh: G. Mohn, 1970), 133.

⁷ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (New York: Harper, 1937), 193.

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liberation from mediocre Christian niceness. Shallow and pernicious notions of “self-esteem,” pervading every sector of the church, whether “evangelical” or “liberal,” in our increasingly therapeutic culture, have everywhere taken their toll. “Adequate spiritual guidance,” wrote Reinhold Niebuhr, “can come only through a more radical political orientation and more conservative religious convictions than are comprehended in the culture of our era.”⁸ These words seem truer today than when Niebuhr first wrote them, and they may well be truer than he knew.

II. GENEROUS ORTHODOXY: TWO SAMPLES

The new catechisms are no panacea, because of course there are no panaceas. At least three generations of ever-declining catechesis, however, have not promoted the progress of the gospel. Presbyterian churches that at the turn of the last century were reeling from distasteful heresy trials enter the new millennium with an identity crisis. Excessive and ill-conceived laxity has replaced the earlier rigidity. The promise of a generous orthodoxy might be the prospect of arresting destructive pendulum swings between unsatisfactory extremes. Here are two small samples of orthodoxy and generosity as embodied in The Study Catechism:

Question 52. *How should I treat non-Christians and people of other religions?*

As much as I can, I should meet friendship with friendship, hostility with kindness, generosity with gratitude, persecution with forbearance, truth with agreement, and error with truth. I should express my faith with humility and devotion as the occasion requires, whether silently or openly, boldly or meekly, by word or by deed. I should avoid compromising the truth on the one hand and being narrow-minded on the other. In short, I should always welcome and accept these others in a way that honors and reflects the Lord’s welcome and acceptance of me.

Question 30. *How do you understand the uniqueness of Jesus Christ?*

No one else will ever be God incarnate. No one else will ever die for the sins of the world. Only Jesus Christ is such a person, only he could do such a work, and he in fact has done it.

Christians make large claims about Jesus Christ, but not about themselves. Humility, openness, and compassion are the only appropriate characteristics

⁸ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Reflections on the End of an Era* (New York, Scribners, 1936), ix.

for those who know that through Jesus Christ they are forgiven sinners. Christians cannot disavow Christ's uniqueness without disavowing the gospel. No mere human being, no matter how praiseworthy, can be affirmed as Lord and Savior. Only because Jesus Christ is fully God as well as also fully human is he the object of Christian worship, obedience, and confession. Christ's uniqueness as confessed by faith is the foundation of generosity, not its ruin, for his uniqueness ensures that every wall of division has been removed. "One has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, that those who live might live no longer for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised" (2 Cor 5:14-15, RSV). Christians cannot live for Jesus Christ without renouncing a life lived only for themselves. They cannot devote themselves to him without living also for the world that he loves, indeed, the world for whose sins he gave himself to die. Remembering that they, too, are sinners whose forgiveness took place at the cross, they stand not against those who do not yet know Christ, but always with them in a solidarity of sin and grace. This solidarity is the open secret of generous orthodoxy, which knows that there is always more grace in God than sin in us. "Welcome one another, therefore, as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God" (Rom 15:7).

III. SOCIAL CONCERNS: THE INTEGRITY OF CREATION, PEACE, AND JUSTICE

Christians are called to bear social witness to Christ in two ways, first through the ordering of their common life, and second through direct action in the surrounding world. Ecclesial ordering and secular intervention comprise a unity in distinction. They are not alternatives, and may well at times blend together. Nonetheless, they are ranked in a particular way. Priority belongs (in principle) to the ordering of the church's common life. The church does not have a social ethic so much as it is a social ethic. A church whose common life merely reflects the social disorders of the surrounding world is scarcely in a strong position for social witness through direct action. In such cases—and where is this not the case?—the gospel must progress in spite of the church, and against its failures. Here too there is more grace in God than sin in us. Note that social witness, whose direct action cannot always wait for the proper ordering of the church's common life, must proceed on several fronts at once. Nevertheless, social witness in discipleship to Christ requires the church to be a countercultural community with its own distinctive profile. It must stand over against the larger culture when that culture's values are incompatible with the gospel. No doubt a church that emphasizes distinctiveness at the expense of solidarity falsifies itself by

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becoming sectarian. A church that loses its distinctiveness, however, through conformity and capitulation, evades its essential vocation of discipleship, especially when it means bearing the cross for being socially dissident. A Christian is an unreliable partisan who knows that peace with God means conflict with the world (even as peace with the world means conflict with God). “You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored?” (Matt 5:13). “You are the light of the world” (Matt 5:14). Disciples are not above their teacher (Matt 10:24).

The rule for social witness is that faithfulness is a higher virtue than effectiveness. Some things ought indeed to be done regardless of whether by human calculations they promise to be effective; and other things ought not to be done, no matter how effective they may promise to be. An example of the first would be things that are so evil that they need to be opposed regardless of whether they can be prevented. An example of the second would be adopting impermissible means to attain commendable ends. The latter merits special comment. Effectiveness pursued at the expense of faithfulness, which is always the church’s undoing, very often arises from the allure of attaining commendable ends through impermissible means. This heedless strategy is nothing more than disobedience rooted in a basic distrust in God. It calls the divine sovereignty, wisdom, and beneficence into question. It doubts that God is faithful. At the same time, it miscalculates what will actually result after impermissible means are employed. The God who brings good out of evil and life out of death is the God who requires the church to speak truth to power come what may. The God whose foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and whose weakness is stronger than human might, is the God who calls the church into ever renewed conformity with its Lord through apparently senseless actions of compassion, noncompliance, and illustration. Note that faithfulness need not be in conflict with effectiveness. Both values are always to be maximized as much as possible. But in conflict situations, which are by no means uncommon, there can be no doubt which direction is expected of the church and commanded by its Lord. “But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you” (Matt 6:33, KJV). “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Rom 12:21, RSV). “For the Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45).

With these principles in mind—the priority of the church’s ordering over its direct action in the world, and the priority of faithfulness over effectiveness—the theme of social witness in the catechism may be pursued.

The Integrity of Creation

Whether the human race will survive the next century is not clear. What is clear is that the means and mechanisms of self-extinction already exist. The bane of modern technology may turn out to be greater than the boon. Ecological destruction is the slow version for which the quick version is nuclear war and its military analogues, with the intermediate version as overpopulation and the gross maldistribution of resources. Widespread devastation, falling short of self-extinction, could still be severe. At the level of technology and social policy, Christians qua Christians will have no special expertise with respect to details. What they have to offer through their social witness is an orientation and direction. Through ordering (or reordering) their common life as well as through direct action in the world, they will always stand, without neglecting the threat of divine judgment, for the possibility of repentance and the reality of hope. They will challenge the technological imperative, which holds that "if it can be done, it must be done," as the symptom of a larger idolatry of human self-mastery and deceit. They will seek to break with destructive habits of consumption, heedless waste of earth's resources, and unrestrained pursuit of private gain at the expense of public good. How to adopt more simple, sustainable patterns of living, not least in the ordering of the church's common life, as well as in the private lives of individual Christians, awaits serious discussion and implementation in the church.

Question 19. *As creatures made in God's image, what responsibility do we have for the earth?*

God commands us to care for the earth in ways that reflect God's loving care for us. We are responsible for ensuring that earth's gifts be used fairly and wisely, that no creature suffers from the abuse of what we are given, and that future generations may continue to enjoy the abundance and goodness of the earth in praise to God.

The catechism can do little more than establish generous orthodoxy's basic outlook. Here it undertakes a modest act of theological repentance. Widely publicized criticisms have not implausibly shown how the biblical injunction to "fill the earth and subdue it" (Gen 1:28) has served to underwrite ecological irresponsibility more often than one would wish. What these criticisms overlook, however, in their zeal to establish blame, is not only the indeterminacy of the text, but also the larger theological resources that scriptural communities possess, not to mention the possibility of their learning from

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past mistakes. New occasions teach new readings—as well as new duties that were unforeseen.

Scriptural communities, whether Christian or Jewish, have always known that the earth belongs to another than themselves. “The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it” (Ps 24:1). They have known that they are not the proprietors but only custodians of a world they have received as a gift. “The heavens are yours, the earth also is yours; the world and all that is in it—you have founded them” (Ps 89:11). They have also seen that profound disorders in our relationship to God inevitably have earthly consequences: “The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant” (Isa 24:5). Finally, they have known, to cite a specifically Christian example, that grace offers the uplifting possibility of renewal despite grievous sins of the past: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Rom 12:2). These verses as just cited are among the ones appended in the catechism to Question 19. While the limits to this approach are obvious, the catechism at least makes a beginning. It orients catechized Christians toward ecological responsibility in a way consonant with traditional faith.

Nonviolence and Peace

Modern warfare with all its horrors has been the defining experience of the twentieth century. A few statistics help tell the story. In this century, more than 100 million people have died in major wars—out of an estimated 149 million total since the first century. In most wars fought in the 1990s, the vast majority of deaths were civilian. In 1995, world military expenditures amounted to more than \$1.4 million per minute. An estimated \$8 trillion dollars has been spent since 1945 on nuclear weapons. The world stockpile of nuclear weapons, despite recent reductions, still represents over 700 times the explosive power in the twentieth century’s three major wars, which killed 44 million people.⁹ The church urgently needs to reconsider how it can be more faithful to the gospel of peace amid this unprecedented world-historical crisis.

(1) *No Power but the Power of Love*. The very idea of “social witness” implies an orientation toward the centrality of God. It means that Christian

⁹ See William Eckhardt, “War-Related Deaths Since 3000 B.C.,” *Bulletin of Peace Proposals* (December 1991); Ruth Leger Sivard, *World Military and Social Expenditures 1996* (Washington, DC: World Priorities, 1996); Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

social action, whether within the community of faith or the larger world, is more than an end in itself. This action does not simply aim to alleviate social misery in the form of hunger, nakedness, homelessness, terror, illness, humiliation, loneliness, and abuse. Efforts to name and oppose social injustice, no matter how important and necessary, are only one aspect of "social witness." As Aristotle has pointed out, any given action or policy can be an end in itself while also serving as the means to a greater end. As important as bread is to us, we do not live by bread alone. Human flourishing, as we know from the gospel, depends on more than the alleviation of social misery and the satisfaction of earthly needs. The main purpose for which we were created is to glorify and enjoy God forever.

This purpose is acknowledged by social witness in at least two ways. First, Christian social witness is parabolic in intent. It aims, in all its forms, to enact parables of God's compassion for the world. Although not all needs are alike, with some lesser or greater than others, God cares for us as whole persons in all our needs. The highest purpose for which we were created is not always remembered in this context. Being created to live by and for God, we know a need that only God can fulfill. Because we are creatures fallen into sin, moreover, we also endure a terrible plight, fatal and self-inflicted, from which we are helpless to free ourselves, but can be rescued only by God, without which we would be cut off from God and one another forever. According to the gospel, God has not abandoned us without hope to this plight, for God does not will to be God without us. On the contrary, God has spared no cost to rescue us. The point is this. No human action, not even by the church, can do for us what God has done, or be for us what God indeed is, at the deepest level of human need. Human action can nonetheless, by grace, serve as a witness. It can point away from itself to God. It can enact parables of compassion that proclaim the gospel. In addressing itself wholeheartedly to lesser needs, Christian social witness points at the same time to God as the only remedy for our greatest need. Christian social witness, in its efforts to alleviate social misery, is thus at once an end in itself while also serving as the means to a greater end.

Second, social witness cannot be parabolic in intent without also being analogical in form. It must correspond to the content it would attest. It cannot point to God without corresponding to God. Correspondence to God is the basic criterion of social witness, and it is this criterion that makes faithfulness more important than effectiveness. The validity of Christian social witness cannot be judged by immediate consequences alone. It must rather be judged, primarily, by the quality of its correspondence to God's compassion as

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revealed and embodied in Jesus Christ. No social witness can be valid that contradicts faithful correspondence, even when that means leaving the consequences to God. Consequences are in any case greatly overrated with respect to their predictability and controllability, just as they are also commonly misjudged when uncompromising faithfulness results in real or apparent failures.

It is no accident that the words *witness* and *martyr* are semantically related. The promise of the gospel is that faithful witness, whether successful in worldly terms or not, will always be validated by God. To believe that supposed effectiveness in violation of faithfulness is promised similar validation can only be illusory. No comprehensive policy of social action, regardless of what it is, will ever be without elements of helplessness, tragedy, and trade-off in the face of human misery. It is always a mistake for faithfulness to overpromise what it can deliver in resisting evil or effecting social change, though it may sometimes be surprisingly effective, or even compatible with maximal effectiveness, depending on the case. Social witness qua witness, in any case, cannot allow itself to be determined primarily by the question of effectiveness, but rather by faithful correspondence to the cruciform compassion of God.

The unprecedented horrors of modern warfare raise acute questions for Christian social witness with respect to nonviolence and peace. Who exactly is the God to whom Christian social action would bear witness? What forms of social action (whether in ecclesial ordering or secular intervention and participation) would correspond to the prior and determinative reality of God? How is God's power exercised in the world, and how is it related to God's love? What does it mean to say that God is omnipotent? Although these and other questions require greater treatment than can be afforded here, we are already in the vicinity of the first article of The Apostles' Creed:

Question 7. *What do you believe when you confess your faith in "God the Father Almighty"?*

That God is a God of love, and that God's love is powerful beyond measure.

Question 8. *How do you understand the love and power of God?*

Through Jesus Christ. In his life of compassion, his death on the cross, and his resurrection from the dead, I see how vast is God's love for the world—a love that is ready to suffer for our sakes, yet so strong that nothing will prevail against it.

Question 9. *What comfort do you receive from this truth?*

This powerful and loving God is the one whose promises I may trust in all the circumstances of my life, and to whom I belong in life and in death.

Question 10. *Do you make this confession only as an individual?*

No. With the apostles, prophets and martyrs, with all those through the ages who have loved the Lord Jesus Christ, and with all who strive to serve him on earth here and now, I confess my faith in the God of loving power and powerful love.

Here again, although the catechism cannot do everything, it can at least do something. By interpreting the divine power in terms of the divine love, it establishes a basic orientation and direction for social witness. It establishes the presumption that no social witness can be valid that exercises or endorses power in flagrant violation of love. Many questions necessarily remain open. In the tradition, these questions circulate around the place of law, justice, and coercion in the work of love, and around the perceived need for recognizing “two realms,” at least one of which (the secular realm) is thought to necessitate power structures, authorities, and policies that are not only coercive but at times inevitably and perhaps massively violent.

Without rejecting these traditional perceptions wholesale, the catechism generally places a question mark beside them (in their commonly received forms). Much depends on whether certain countervailing divine attributes (like mercy and righteousness, or love and wrath) are best understood dualistically, through a “pattern of disjunction,” or else integratively, through a “pattern of mutual inclusion.” In the second pattern, the positive divine qualities would be seen as including and fundamentally determining the negative ones, with the latter being expressions of the former. Stronger constraints than traditional are thereby placed on adhering directly to compassion in faithful witness, on pain of severe dis-analogy to the God ostensibly attested.¹⁰ (Note that the question of which pattern for the divine attributes is valid is logically independent of its social consequences. That question must be decided on its own merits. One of the most lamentable aspects of

¹⁰ In other words, the constraints are definitely weaker when (with the normal Augustinian tradition), the pattern of disjunction is in force. In that case, the divine righteousness, holiness, and wrath are viewed as operating, in some strong sense, alongside and independent of the divine mercy, grace, and love. This split in God then warrants a corresponding split in earthly life between the spiritual (ecclesial) and the secular realms, with correspondingly different ethical norms supposedly applying to each domain. Representatives of this tradition, like Calvin, acknowledge that the pattern of disjunction makes it seem as though God's being is in tragic conflict with itself. Whether this is really the proper point at which to invoke, as they do, the divine inscrutability, is one of the key points disputed by those who adhere to the pattern of mutual inclusion.

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contemporary Christian social ethics is the unconscionable tendency to manipulate the doctrine of God in order to generate what are perceived as desirable social outcomes. Such instrumentalizing of God stands in flagrant violation of faithful witness, making God into little more than the object of wish fulfillment and projection. T. S. Eliot is still right that the greatest treason is to do the right thing for the wrong reason.)

(2) *The Nonviolent Cross*. The catechism explains the first article of the creed on a christocentric basis. It appeals to Jesus Christ's Incarnation, crucifixion, and Resurrection to validate the conviction that God's power is immanent in God's love. Jesus Christ's life history clarifies the whole history of the covenant. It shows definitively that God knows no power but the power of love and that God's love is powerful. It reveals how free and strong that love is—so free it is “ready to suffer for our sakes, yet so strong that nothing will prevail against it.” A challenge thereby surfaces against too readily accepting any analysis that would pit “powerless love” against “loveless power,” with the latter condoned as a necessary evil. Although loveless power cannot be denied as the terrible reality it is, the gospel includes the great promise that in the ultimate scheme of things there is no such thing as powerless or ineffective love.

How is the ultimate reality of love's triumph to be faithfully attested here and now? Will not the implicit constraints of love, as argued here, on the permissible uses of power have deleterious consequences? Will not preventable evils be accepted, and attainable goods be sacrificed, if social witness inordinately restricts itself to forms of suffering love? The historic differences on these matters within the broad Christian tradition will undoubtedly persist. Yet does the cross of Christ not seem clearly to establish a strong presumption that social witness will most fittingly take shape through actions and policies of nonviolence, not excluding resistance and direct action, even to the point, perhaps, of civil disobedience, civilian-based defense, and conscientious objection to unjust wars? Why should the grotesque sacrifices required by armed conflict automatically seem more necessary and promising than the sacrifices that undeniably would be required by alternative strategies of nonviolence? Does the unprecedented world-historical military crisis not call the church to reexamine whether it has fully taken the measure of the faithfulness required by its Lord? Can the church today responsibly participate in the preparations and mechanisms of mass destruction? Can it pretend that the history of the twentieth century did not occur?

The triumph of God's suffering love, as revealed and embodied in Christ, is a theme that unifies the entire catechism. The catechism conveys the basic Christian conviction that in reigning from the cross, the suffering love of God

has triumphed in its very weakness over all that is hostile to itself (cf. 1 Cor 1:25). Here is one example of this theme:

Question 41. *How did Jesus Christ fulfill the office of king?*

He was the Lord who took the form of a servant; he perfected royal power in weakness. With no sword but the sword of righteousness, and no power but the power of love, Christ defeated sin, evil and death by reigning from the cross.

Relative to historic Reformed standards, the catechism offers an interpretation of Christ's threefold office that is unique in being thoroughly christocentric. It is not the office that defines Christ, but Christ who defines the office. Here the royal aspect of the threefold office is defined as centered on the cross. The divine strategy for defeating sin, evil, and death—*regnantem in cruce*—is fulfilled in suffering love. "God does not use violent means to obtain what he desires," wrote Irenaeus.¹¹ God does not liberate us from our captivity, echoed Gregory of Nyssa, "by a violent exercise of force."¹² Since the greatness of the divine power is revealed disconcertingly in the form of the cross, how can Christian social witness fail to match? The basic criterion of faithful social witness (conformity to the God whose action is attested) would seem to point the church in principle toward strategies of nonviolent love.

An important test for nonviolent social witness is whether it can incorporate a strong element of justice. If this witness meant simply capitulating to evil, violence, and abuse, it would not only be deficient in itself, but also in its testimony to God. For God is not merciful without also being righteous, nor gracious without also being holy, nor loving without also being wrathful toward everything that tramples on love. Domestic and sexual violence, for example, long suppressed from the light of day in church and society, have recently emerged to illustrate how traditional pastoral counsels to submission, whether well-meaning or thoughtless, can be tragically mistaken and abused. Nonviolence is not the opposite of resistance and prudence. It is the opposite of vindictiveness, retaliation, and hatred—including policies or actions based on them. It recognizes that there is a time to resist and a time to flee as well as a time to suffer and submit. It allows for nonretaliatory initiatives of protest and self-defense. It nonetheless finds it hard to understand how one can love one's enemies by killing them. It is prepared, if necessary, to suffer and die for peace rather than kill for peace. Its deepest motivation is not to keep itself

¹¹ Irenaeus, "Against Heresies," in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 527.

¹² Gregory of Nyssa, "The Great Catechism, XXII," in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, Vol. 5, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 492.

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morally pure, but to bear faithful witness through conformity to the enacted patterns of divine love. It believes, when grounded in the gospel, that sin can be forgiven without being condoned, for this is how we are all forgiven by God:

Question 81. *Does forgiveness mean that God condones sin?*

No. God does not cease to be God. Although God is merciful, God does not condone what God forgives. In the death and resurrection of Christ, God judges what God abhors—everything hostile to love—by abolishing it at the very roots. In this judgment the unexpected occurs: good is brought out of evil, hope out of hopelessness, and life out of death. God spares sinners, and turns them from enemies into friends. The uncompromising judgment of God is revealed in the suffering love of the cross.

The social witness of the catechism to nonviolence and peace takes place mainly at the level of its affirmations about God. It affirms that as revealed and embodied in Jesus Christ, God's power is the power of love, that it reigns over all that would oppose it, and that it triumphs through the suffering of the cross. The church cannot possibly be faithful in witness without meditating on the heart of the gospel. While not all disagreements are likely to be removed, a strong presumption toward nonviolence is required by the cross. Arising from the gospel as considered in itself, this presumption seems especially urgent for the century ahead. Trusting in the sure promises of God, social witness will ever need to ponder anew that fellowship with Christ does not exclude fellowship with him in his sufferings. "God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord" (1 Cor 1:9). "I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord . . . that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that if possible I may obtain the resurrection from the dead" (Phil 3:8, 10–11).¹³

Social Justice

The catechism takes the same approach to social justice as it does toward ecological responsibility and peace. It offers an orientation and direction, no

¹³ It might be noted that the catechism acknowledges the reality of institutional violence. It thereby goes beyond traditional Reformed catechisms, for it interprets the Ten Commandments as pertaining to more than relations between individuals. For the commandment against murder, it offers this explanation:

Question 108. *What do you learn from this commandment?*

God forbids anything that harms my neighbor unfairly. Murder or injury can be done not only by direct violence but also by an angry word or a clever plan, and not only by an individual but also by unjust social institutions. I should honor every human being, including my enemy, as a person made in God's image.

A context is thus established (among other things) for naming institutional violence and seeking to end it.

more, no less. It establishes work for social justice on the basis of traditional faith, especially as interpreted christocentrically. Six areas in particular may be noted: against social prejudice, solidarity with the oppressed, concern for the poor, social witness without resignation, full equality for women in church and society, and systemic focus.

(1) *Against Social Prejudice.* A neglected theme of holy scripture is the connection between lies and violence. Where there is the one, scripture recognizes, there is likely to be the other. Violence (as for example when perpetrated by governments or powerful social groups) commonly requires lies to conceal itself, just as lies commonly prepare the way for brutality and abuse. Lies are a form of verbal violence, just as violence is the ultimate defamation of the other. Relevant verses from the Psalms and the prophets are cited by Paul. In the long, harrowing passage on the divine wrath at the opening of his Letter to the Romans, the apostle writes: "Their throats are opened graves; they use their tongues to deceive. The venom of vipers is under their lips. . . . Their feet are swift to shed blood" (Rom 3:13, 15). In explicating the commandment that forbids false witness against one's neighbor, the catechism draws attention to this scriptural insight:

Question 115. *Does this commandment forbid racism and other forms of negative stereotyping?*

Yes. In forbidding false witness against my neighbor, God forbids me to be prejudiced against people who belong to any vulnerable, different or disfavored social group. Jews, women, homosexuals, racial and ethnic minorities, and national enemies are among those who have suffered terribly from being subjected to the slurs of social prejudice. Negative stereotyping is a form of falsehood that invites actions of humiliation, abuse, and violence as forbidden by the commandment against murder.

No previous Reformed catechism, to my knowledge, has named social prejudice and negative stereotyping as a violation of the ninth commandment. Nor has any sought to explain how the commandments against false witness and murder are interconnected. Confessing and repenting of social sins have rarely been emphasized in church catechesis as strongly as they have been for personal sins. Finding a convincing basis within the tradition for redressing this unhappy imbalance has clear advantages for the church over other strategies. Antisemitism, misogyny, homophobia, racial prejudice, and the demonizing of enemies all stand in direct violation of the ninth commandment. They have all implicated the church in murder. It will be a wonderful day when social prejudice and negative stereotyping are disorders that the church finds only in the surrounding world. Until then, actions against social

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prejudice belong above all in the renewing of minds within the ordering of the church's common life. How much longer, for example, will the de facto segregation of the churches in the United States continue to ratify and perpetuate the American system of apartheid? How can the churches expect to bear faithful witness to the reconciliation accomplished at the cross when they fail to be fellowships of reconciliation in themselves? Antiracism programs recently approved for use within PC(USA) congregations are a step in the right direction. "Speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the destitute. Speak out, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy" (Prov 31:8-9).

(2) *Solidarity with the Oppressed.* A recurring phenomenon in the history of Christian theology has been the displacement of central truths by lesser truths. Usually these displacements are more or less temporary. Nevertheless, they can cause great confusion while they last. Polarizations and animosities typically form between two groups—those in their wisdom who passionately reject one truth that they might recover the centrality of another, and those who do much the same thing only in reverse. In such cases, the solution arises when central truths are allowed to be central and lesser truths are allowed to be lesser. The truth of neither is denied, and room can even be found for allowing the lesser truths, perhaps previously unnoticed or neglected, to assume the urgency of situational precedence.¹⁴

During the last twenty-five years or so, the church has increasingly witnessed the emergence of victim-oriented soteriologies. The plight of victims, variously specified and defined, has been urged by prominent theologians as the central soteriological problem. It can scarcely be denied that the history of the twentieth century has pushed the plight of victims to the fore. Nor can it be denied that the church has too often seemed ill-equipped to bring the plight of victims, especially victims of oppression and social injustice, clearly into focus for itself so that reasonable and faithful remedies might be sought. Victim-oriented soteriologies have undoubtedly made an important contribution to a better understanding of the church's social responsibility.

Polarizations and animosities have developed, however, to the extent that the plight of victims has displaced the soteriological plight of sinners, or even

¹⁴ This kind of flexibility between de jure and de facto considerations was recognized by Calvin. Commenting on a scriptural passage whose syntactical ordering places duties to others before duties to God, Calvin wrote: "Nor is it strange that he begins with the duties of love of neighbor. For although the worship of God has precedence and ought rightly to come first, yet justice which is practiced in human relations is the true evidence of devotion to God" (Calvin, "Commentary on Micah 6:6-8," in *Calvin: Commentaries*, ed. Joseph Haroutunian [Philadelphia-Westminster, 1958], 316).

eclipsed it. Victim-oriented soteriologies have unfortunately tended to define the meaning of sin entirely in terms of victimization. Sin ceases to be a universal category. It attaches to perpetrators and to them alone. Since by definition victims qua victims are innocent of being perpetrators, they are to that extent innocent of sin. If sin attaches only to perpetrators, however, victims can be sinners only by somehow becoming perpetrators themselves (a move not unknown in victim-oriented soteriologies). Victim-oriented soteriologies, with their bipolar opposition between victims and perpetrators, display a logic with sectarian tendencies.

How the cross of Christ is understood by these soteriologies is also worth noting. The cross becomes meaningful because it shows the divine solidarity with victims, generally ceasing to find any other relevance, at least positively. (In extreme cases, the theology of the cross is trashed as a cause of victimization. But such denunciations, when meant *de jure*, exceed the bounds even of heterodoxy and so cease to be of constructive interest to the church.) The cross, in any case, is no longer the supreme divine intervention for the forgiveness of sins. It is not surprising that more traditional, sin-oriented soteriologies should react with unfortunate polarization. When that happens, however, sin as a universal category obscures the plight of oppression's victims, rendering that plight just as invisible or irrelevant as it was before. Atonement without solidarity seems to exhaust the significance of the cross, and forgiveness supposedly occurs without judgment on oppression.

The task of generous orthodoxy in this situation is to dispel polarization by letting central truths be central, and lesser truths be lesser, but in each case letting truth be truth. No reason exists why the cross as atonement for sin should be viewed as logically incompatible with the cross as divine solidarity with the oppressed. Good reasons can be found for connecting them. The great historical, ecumenical consensus remains, however, that the central significance of the cross, as attested by holy scripture, is the forgiveness of sins. This established consensus pervades every aspect of the church's life, not least including baptism and the Lord's Supper. It has by this time withstood all the onslaughts of unbelieving modernity (so that the only question today is not whether the ecumenical consensus will survive but whether those churches devitalized by modern skepticism will). It is reflected throughout the new catechism.¹⁵ No ecclesial catechesis can be valid that fails to affirm the forgiveness of sins as the central truth of the cross.

¹⁵ The treatment of our Lord's priestly office may be mentioned as an example.

Question 40. *How did Jesus Christ fulfill the office of priest?*

He was the Lamb of God that took away the sin of the world; he became our priest and sacrifice in one. Confronted by our hopelessness in sin and death, Christ interceded by offering himself—his entire person and work—in order to reconcile us to God.

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Lesser truths, however, ought not to be pitted against central truths. Lesser truths, moreover, gain rather than diminish in significance when decentered, for they no longer have a role foisted upon them that they cannot possibly fulfill. Generous orthodoxy as evidenced in the catechism attempts to do justice to both central and lesser truths in themselves as well as to their proper ordering.

Question 42. *What do you affirm when you say that he “suffered under Pontius Pilate”?*

First, that our Lord was humiliated, rejected and abused by the temporal authorities of his day, both religious and political. Christ thus aligned himself with all human beings who are oppressed, tortured, or otherwise shamefully treated by those with worldly power. Second, and even more importantly, that our Lord, though innocent, submitted himself to condemnation by an earthly judge so that through him we ourselves, though guilty, might be acquitted before our heavenly Judge.

The oppressed have always understood that the cross brings them consolation and hope by placing God into solidarity with their misery. The African American spiritual is exactly right when it laments, “Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen. Nobody knows but Jesus.” The gospel does not obscure that our Lord was “mocked and insulted and spat upon” (Luke 18:32), that he was “despised and rejected” by others (Isa 53:3). Admittedly, the church has not always kept pace with scripture in recognizing that “The Lord is a stronghold for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble” (Ps 9:9). It has not always prayed fervently enough with the psalmist: “May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor” (Ps 72:4), nor has it always acted conscientiously enough on the basis of such prayers. Social witness has a perpetual obligation to solidarity with the oppressed. This obligation, however, is entirely consonant with the truth (which can be displaced only at our peril) on which the entire gospel depends: “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5:21).

(3) *Concern for the Poor.* When the universality of sin is recognized as the central soteriological problem, the results can be liberating. All illusions are dispelled, for example, that though others may be needy, I am not, and that I am therefore somehow above others if I am in a position to help them in their need. Acknowledging my need, conversely, brings no implication that I am beneath others who may help me. When recognition is accorded to the universality of divine grace, moreover, I am freed from moralistic forms of obligation. For when grounded in the reception of grace, social obligation is

not an externally imposed duty, but a response to the needs of others in gratitude to the God who has already responded so graciously to me. My response to others is based on a solidarity in sin and grace. It occurs as an act of witness to the gospel and through participation in the grace of God. "Walk in love, as Christ has loved us and gave himself up for us" (Eph 5:2).

Question 64 in the catechism states that the mission of the church is to extend mercy and forgiveness to "the needy" in ways that point to Christ. The next question follows with a definition:

Question 65. *Who are the needy?*

The hungry need bread, the homeless need a roof, the oppressed need justice, and the lonely need fellowship. At the same time—on another and deeper level—the hopeless need hope, sinners need forgiveness, and the world needs the gospel. On this level no one is excluded, and all the needy are one. Our mission as the church is to bring hope to a desperate world by declaring God's undying love—as one beggar tells another where to find bread.

The ordering principle that distinguishes and unites our lesser needs with our central need is again in evidence. Our lesser needs are related to our central need by a unity in distinction. Concern for the poor and needy stands in inseparable unity with the forgiveness of sins, without displacing it or becoming a substitute for it. The catechism makes a similar move when it explains the fourth petition of the Lord's Prayer:

Question 130. *What is meant by the fourth petition, "Give us today our daily bread"?*

We ask God to provide for all our needs, for we know that God, who cares for us in every area of our life, has promised us temporal as well as spiritual blessings. God commands us to pray each day for all that we need and no more, so that we will learn to rely completely on God. We pray that we will use what we are given wisely, remembering especially the poor and the needy. Along with every living creature we look to God, the source of all generosity, to bless us and nourish us, according to the divine good pleasure.

Concern for the poor and the needy has a solid basis in traditional faith, as when linked with this petition of the Lord's Prayer. Through the recovery of sound catechesis, concern for the poor, among other things, could become more deeply embedded in the life of the church. A person who fears and blesses the Lord "opens her hand to the poor, and reaches out her hands to the needy" (Prov 31:20). It will be a great day when congregations not only give money to help the poor, but also create situations in which the poor feel welcome to participate in the life and work of the congregations themselves.

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(4) *Social Witness without Resignation.* Hope for the next world has sometimes been thought to relieve us of responsibility for this one. The catechism connects our ultimate hope indivisibly to our smaller hopes, without confusing them. It grounds all our hopes in the gracious reconciliation accomplished at the cross. Urging constancy in work and prayer, it promotes social witness without resignation:

Question 86. *Does resurrection hope mean that we don't have to take action to relieve the suffering of this world?*

No. When the great hope is truly alive, small hopes arise even now for alleviating the sufferings of the present time. Reconciliation—with God, with one another, and with oneself—is the great hope God has given to the world. While we commit to God the needs of the whole world in our prayers, we also know that we are commissioned to be instruments of God's peace. When hostility, injustice and suffering are overcome here and now, we anticipate the end of all things—the life that God brings out of death, which is the meaning of resurrection hope.

(5) *Full Equality of Women in Church and Society.* The catechism presupposes that the full equality of women in church and society is compatible with the heart of the gospel as understood by traditional faith. Although this presupposition is strongly contested today, the many complexities cannot be discussed here. From the standpoint of generous orthodoxy, however, “defecting in place,” as advocated by some, is, regretfully, not always easy to distinguish from defecting from the gospel. As one avowedly post-Christian feminist theologian has shrewdly argued, Christians must at least believe that Jesus Christ is unique. She then goes on to show that this very minimal condition is not met by a number of avowedly Christian feminist theologians, some of whom are quite prominent.¹⁶ Since she believes that feminism and the gospel cannot possibly be reconciled, she challenges these theologians to quit the church. Their responses are not always encouraging. If no better reasons can be found for not quitting the church than the merely expedient ones commonly offered for “defecting in place,” feminist concerns face dismal prospects outside narrow circles.

It is fortunate that a younger generation of feminist theologians is emerging. (I am thinking, for example, of figures such as Katherine Sonderegger of Middlebury, Judith Gundry-Volf of Yale, and Ellen Charry of Princeton.) They promise to bring a new level of sophistication to the important, though not always well known, work of ground-breaking activist groups such as Christians for Biblical Equality. Gender equality and the elimination of male

¹⁶ Daphne Hampson, *Theology and Feminism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 59–66, 156–60.

privilege are too important to be left to the tragically confused who think they can blame constitutive elements of the gospel for women's oppression, while gaining a wide hearing in the church. Both logically and psychologically, the contradiction is intolerable. It will inevitably resolve itself in one of two ways: either by reconciling feminism with biblical faith or else by choosing feminism over biblical faith and quitting the church. Halfway measures, whatever their appeal, will be abortive. A challenge to generous orthodoxy, yet to be adequately met, is how to reconcile feminist concerns with traditional faith. The direction, however, is clear: "Be subject to one another out of reverence to Christ" (Eph 5:21). The church awaits a feminism that is both orthodox and generous.

The catechism makes its own effort, however modest, in opting for the hopeful alternative. A simple misconception is cleared up:

Question 11. *When the creed speaks of "God the Father," does it mean that God is male?*

No. Only creatures having bodies can be either male or female. But God has no body, since by nature God is Spirit. Holy Scripture reveals God as a living God beyond all sexual distinctions. Scripture uses diverse images for God, female as well as male. We read, for example, that God will no more forget us than a woman can forget her nursing child (Isa 49:15). "As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you," says the Lord" (Isa 66:13).

Beyond that, male privilege is disallowed, abuse is condemned, and women's full participation in the leadership in the church is affirmed:

Question 13. *When you confess the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, are you elevating men over women and endorsing male domination?*

No. Human power and authority are trustworthy only as they reflect God's mercy and kindness, not abusive patterns of domination. As Jesus taught his disciples, "The greatest among you will be your servant" (Matt 23:11). God the Father sets the standard by which all misuses of power are exposed and condemned. "Call no one your father on earth," said Jesus, "for you have one Father—the one in heaven" (Matt 23:9). In fact God calls women and men to all ministries of the church.

Many questions remain to be addressed, but once again, in its own way, the catechism makes a start.

(6) *Systemic Focus.* Although the gospel provides every reason for Christians not to be moralistic, they not only too often are moralistic, but also allow moralism to substitute for clear-sighted social analysis. They fail to inquire

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very deeply into the logic of incentives established by social and economic systems. Though not always free of this problem, Calvin can be an exemplary corrective. Ever alert to the disorders of the human heart, he does not restrict his social criticism to spiritual disorders alone. For example, in a comment on Isaiah 2:12, 16, relevant to our own day regarding the way impoverished, debt-ridden peoples are treated by affluent nations, Calvin wrote: "Trade carried on with far-off foreign nations is often replete with cheating and extortion, and no limit is set to the profits." Commerce is condemned by the prophet, he noted, "because it has infected the land with many corruptions." When abundance is accumulated by exploiting the vulnerable and defenseless, Calvin concluded, it only "increases pride and cruelty."¹⁷ Human beings "steal," wrote Calvin in another place, "not only when they secretly take the property of others, but also when they make money by injuring others, accumulate wealth in objectionable ways, or are more concerned with their own advantage than with justice."¹⁸

The catechism (modestly) makes explicit the systemic consciousness that seems nascent in Calvin's ruminations. It recognizes that theft can be more than just a moral or spiritual phenomenon. In explaining the eighth commandment, it states:

Question 112. *What do you learn from this commandment?*

God forbids all theft and robbery, including schemes, tricks or systems that unjustly take what belongs to someone else. God requires me not to be driven by greed, not to misuse or waste the gifts I have been given, and not to distrust the promise that God will supply my needs.

Dispositions toward greed, abuse, and waste are not merely moral disorders but also specifically spiritual ones, rooted in distrust and disobedience to God. At the same time, they can also find institutionalized expression through the logic of incentives built into large-scale social and economic systems. It is this latter dimension that the church must take more seriously today than in the past in order to exercise social responsibility in the modern world. Although large areas for discussion and disagreement remain, the church can only gain by including a greater systemic focus within its concerns. Again, typical mistakes will need to be avoided which pit moral, spiritual, and institutional considerations against one another. As the catechism recognizes, they are interconnected. A systemic focus would foster a new sensitivity to forms of exploitation and oppression that the church, especially in affluent countries, cannot responsibly shrug off with cheap resignation. Large-scale, non-

¹⁷ Calvin, "Commentary on Isa. 2:12, 16," in *Calvin: Commentaries*, 350.

¹⁸ Calvin, "Commentary on Ex. 20-15/Deut. 5:19," in *Calvin-Commentaries*, 328-9.

governmental initiatives—modelled perhaps on the Pauline collection in apostolic times—might be among the strategies the international church could adopt in addressing the scandalous differentials of wealth and poverty within its own ranks, though broad-based and multidimensional initiatives of various kinds are urgently needed by the vast majority who constitute the world's poor.

IV. CONCLUSION

This essay has sought to explain how the new catechism supports social witness on the basis of generous orthodoxy. It has argued for two principles that, though not explicit in the catechism, are consonant with it: the *de jure* precedence of ordering the church's common life so that it accords with the gospel (without discounting direct action in the surrounding world), and, more controversially, effectiveness within the limits of faithfulness alone. The chief criterion of social witness, it has been argued, is conformity to the enacted patterns of the divine compassion as revealed and embodied in Jesus Christ. The established ecumenical concern for justice, peace, and the integrity of creation was interpreted (in reverse order) within this context. The catechism promotes ecological responsibility through its instruction about the image of God. It establishes a strong presumption to nonviolence through its teachings on the cross of Christ. Last but not least, it encourages social justice in the following ways: (1) by opposing negative stereotyping on the basis of the ninth commandment, (2) by establishing ecclesial solidarity with the oppressed on the basis of the prior divine solidarity, (3) by highlighting a biblical concern for the plight of the poor, (4) by opposing weak resignation in the face of social evils, (5) by calling for women's full equality and the elimination of male privilege on a biblical basis that the entire church can take seriously, and (6) by recognizing a systemic focus for the church's social responsibility in the modern world. In these ways, an attempt was made to show how progressive political aspirations can be grounded in traditional faith, when interpreted with the catechism, in the form of generous orthodoxy.¹⁹

¹⁹ The Study Catechism can be obtained in a handsome edition, which includes fully written-out scripture references for each question, from *Presbyterians for Renewal*, 8134 New LaGrange Road, Suite 227, Louisville, Kentucky 40222-4679, USA. (FAX: 502-423-8329). The cost is US \$4.00 per copy. No edition of *The First Catechism* is currently available from this source. Versions of both catechisms—without the inclusion of written-out scripture verses—can be obtained in inexpensive editions from *The Presbyterian Publishing Corporation*, 100 Witherspoon Street, Louisville, Kentucky 40202-1396, USA.