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# LEARNING THEOLOGICAL ETHICS THROUGH THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM

## ABSTRACT

This article looks to the logic of grace and gratitude in the Heidelberg Catechism (HC) in order to examine a disposing pattern of sensibility and affection as well as four lessons for a contemporary Protestant theological ethic. It also suggests a revision of the catechism's basic theology in light of the current ecological crisis and in conjunction with a theocentric strand in Reformed theologies of creation.

Reformed communities in North America have long appreciated the Heidelberg Catechism for its piety and emotional resonance, and this year, the Presbyterian Church (USA) voted to replace an older translation in its *Book of Confessions* with a new one. Interestingly, the reason for commissioning the new translation was not so much to celebrate the catechism's 450th birthday as to address a controversy over the rendering of the answer to Question 87. The English translation adopted by the Church in 1967 says Scripture teaches "no fornicator or idolater, none who are guilty either of adultery or of homosexual perversion, no thieves or grabbers or drunkards or slanderers or swindlers, will possess the kingdom of God." The new translation, which follows the German text more closely, drops "homosexual perversion" from the list.<sup>1</sup>

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1 However, the German text lists 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 (which in the NRSV refers to "male prostitutes" and "sodomites") in support of Question 87. Question numbers in parentheses follow subsequent quotations from the new translation.

This is an important matter and I will comment on it later. My primary aim, however, is more general. As I read the catechism, the logic of grace and gratitude is fundamental: God gives and we ought to receive God's gifts with thankfulness. This contributes to a disposing pattern of sensibility and affection in conjunction with sharply Protestant understandings of sin, redemption, church, and faithfulness. My essay examines elements of this pattern in order to identify broad lessons for a contemporary Protestant ethic as well as a criticism that reflects a current challenge.

## 1. A PIETY AND MANNER OF LIVING RATHER THAN "MERE DOCTRINE"

The 19<sup>th</sup> century American John W. Nevin extolled the catechism's "freshness of religious feeling" and "deep toned piety." Indeed, as he expounded its "mystical element," he claimed that the catechism is "no cold workmanship merely of the rationalizing intellect" (Nevin 1851:xv-xvi).<sup>2</sup> Nevin's point becomes clear if we read Question 1 with care and an eye for existential depth. "What is your only comfort in life and in death?" Life bounded by death, existence threatened with extinction, being threatened with nothingness, or *life rendered insecure by death* – this amounts to an emotionally freighted reading of the human situation (Barth 1981:29).

Consider that my projects, accomplishments, and relationships are set within a world of changing conditions, unpredictable actions, and unanticipated consequences. I find that the things I value are contingent and at risk, and I therefore strive to secure them – my family, my work, my nation, for example – as well as their enduring meaning, against a world of uncertainties, both real and imagined. But the fact that life is bounded by death means that my effort must finally fail. Thus, in face of this final threat, my anxiety is heightened, and the meaning of life, or of my many loves, accomplishments, and relationships, always remains insecure.

Indeed, just because I know my life to be ultimately threatened, just because I know the meaning of all my activities and relationships to be insecure, I redouble my efforts to secure them. I try to deny death, to suppress my fundamental insecurity by engaging in a constant round

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2 This is the sort of thing Nevin taught at the seminary of the Reformed Church at Mercersburg, Pennsylvania while students at Princeton Seminary were schooled in more scholastic pronouncements of Charles Hodge, such as "If natural science be concerned with the facts and laws of nature, theology is concerned with the facts and principles of Scripture" (Hodge 1977:18).

of activities aimed at amassing power and control.<sup>3</sup> My striving is often destructive to myself and to others, but this does not deter me, because no matter how much power I accumulate, I may yet identify and imagine additional threats, and I also remain constantly aware of the final threat. I therefore continue my striving in the (vain) hope that I can shield myself from my fundamental anxiety and thus secure my own fulfilment. This is sin as pride or inordinate self-assertion.

The alternative is sin as sloth. Just because I recognize that I cannot secure my own life, loves, and projects, I insulate myself from disturbing risks. I try to relieve my anxiety by losing myself in lesser, more easily secured objects of desire, such as possessions, food, drink, or TV. Now the problem is not an inordinate will-to-control, but a tendency to disengage and participate deficiently in my many relationships and responsibilities.<sup>4</sup>

We see both aspects of sin in American society today with its heightened concerns for security on the one hand, and a tendency to disengage from international challenges on the other. The broader existential point, however, is that the question of comfort alludes to “life-overtaken-by-insecurity-pride-and-sloth.” It refers to contingent, intelligent, imaginative, and capable human life beset by an unshakable sickness or corruption. Even so, the question is not neutral, but raised from a quite definite standpoint. This becomes clear when we consider the answer. “That I am not my own, but belong – body and soul, in life and in death – to my faithful Saviour,” who at great price has atoned for my sin and “set me free from the tyranny of the devil.”

This is a word of assurance that sets life on a different course, and it has both negative and positive dimensions. Negatively, I am not my own. And, despite what the boosters of autonomy may say, this is a *good* thing because I am delivered from the necessity of securing my life’s meaning, controlling every contingency, and eliminating every threat. I am not my own. Therefore, I need not banish all anxiety and insecurity. I need neither deny nor defeat death. Positively, I belong “to my faithful Saviour.” True, I am decentred and no longer self-possessed, but it is not as if I belong nowhere. I belong to another, and this is not merely a speculative possibility or a prediction. The positive is not “That I *may* belong,” but rather “That I belong.” The word of assurance is that I belong already, and not merely prospectively or conditionally, to one who addresses my circumstance and puts things right. I belong to Jesus Christ.

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3 “The prospect of death ... is a mainspring of ... activity designed largely to avoid the fatality of death, to overcome it by denying in some way that it is the final destiny of man” (Becker 1973:xvii).

4 On pride and sloth, see Niebuhr 1992:178-240 and Gustafson 1981:293-306.

The point is worth exploring. My sin binds me to feverish attempts at banishing anxiety, insecurity, and death by taking control and / or growing numb, by trying to be like God and / or trying to throw life away. This is the devil's dominion, the corrupting rule of a faithless and false interpretation of the human situation – a faithless and false deification and / or abdication that brings with it a train of bad consequences. Indeed, through my efforts to secure myself, my heart has been taken captive by a disposition that reduces, wounds, and misdirects the life for which I have been fitted and sustained. But by his costly sacrifice, “my faithful Saviour ... has paid for all my sins ... and has set me free.” My Saviour has delivered me into another frame of reference and self-understanding. For this reason, I am no longer defined by the false (and finally defeating) assumption that I belong to myself and therefore must secure my life against innumerable and insuperable threats. I do not have to justify myself because I am defined instead (and already) by a saving relationship to “my Father in heaven.”<sup>5</sup>

More traditionally stated, in Jesus Christ I know God as faithful Redeemer and am adopted as God's child. That is, in belonging to Jesus Christ I belong to the faithful God. But if this is so, then I no longer define myself primarily with reference to threats and anxieties that I must control and suppress. Instead I *am defined* by the faithful God's relationship to me. This relationship sets me into a different (and covenantal) frame of reference. As the Presbyterian Church's Brief Statement of Faith says, “In life and in death, we belong to God” (PCUSA 1996:10.1). Now, the contingencies of my life, the realities of death, nature, and history, are placed within the dominion of the faithful God.

This new relationship and frame of reference does not eliminate contingency, anxiety, and insecurity. Instead, it adds an assurance that I am held worthy in existence quite apart from my powers, competencies, and accomplishments, quite apart from my efforts to control and perhaps also to abdicate life. It assures me that my meaning and worth already have been secured and bestowed. I am therefore delivered into another, truer life – one characterized by contingencies, risks, anxieties, and insecurities but also by this assurance.<sup>6</sup> Grace thereby bestows upon me the courage to participate in contingent existence and its many relationships,

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5 “To this whole system in which I have only as much worth as I acquire for myself, the gospel stands diametrically opposed. For the gospel tells us ... You are of worth, your life has the right to existence and respect, not because you *make* it worthy by production and still more production ... but out of grace” (Busch 2010:262).

6 “Theology is about the relation between God and humanity. It is not we who set up this relation ... Instead, we ... proceed from the conviction that God has brought and continues to bring Godself into relationship with us” (Busch 2010:4).

responsibilities and risks. In response, I am genuinely thankful and ready to express my gratitude in a different, more expansive manner of living.

Or, as the catechism says, by Christ and the Spirit, I am made “wholeheartedly willing and ready.” Christ and the Spirit make known to me the faithful God’s gratuitous acceptance and my belonging to the faithful God. This “knowledge” (in Calvin’s sense of the word) lends to me a new and grateful heart. It encourages me to take up a different direction or trajectory. It turns me *ec-centrally* so that I am centred outside of and beyond myself in relation to the God of grace, and live not merely for myself but for God and neighbour.<sup>7</sup>

Here, then, is our first lesson. A theological ethic steeped in the logic of grace does not proceed from what Nevin called “mere doctrine.”<sup>8</sup> It does not begin with abstract principles or a technical and theoretical reflection. Instead, it proceeds from a piety or disposition based in a saving relationship that turns us toward an ec-centric manner of living. Contrary to the frenetic and often naively optimistic ethos of modern commercial cultures, this piety senses that all are skewed, all subject to the destructive dynamics of anxiety, insecurity, and sin. But, in Christ and the Spirit, it is also (and irrepressibly) hopeful because it knows that we belong to the God of grace.

## 2. REALISM AND REMORSE

The logic of grace correlates with the catechism’s insistence that we are unable to live up to the law of love of God and neighbour (HC 4). All (Adam, Eve, and their descendants) are corrupted, gripped by a wrong tendency or inclination, and therefore in need of forgiveness and renewal (HC 9, 5,

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7 David Kelsey recently has written a two-volume work in which he says an eccentric existence is one “enacted in the power of the Spirit” rather than in “unqualified autonomy” (Kelsey 2009: 761-2). HC affirms this and so do I. However, by an ec-centric manner of living I mean to emphasize what H. Richard Niebuhr did when he wrote of a life oriented toward the increase of love of God and neighbor rather than simply the furthering of oneself or one’s group (H.R. Niebuhr 1957:36-9). An ec-centric manner of living is the opposite of a self-centered or egocentric manner of life (*encurvatus in se*). Or, again, what I mean connects with what Wolfhart Pannenberg calls the *exocentricity* of humans as creatures who find “the center that can give unity to their lives is not in themselves but must be based outside themselves” (Pannenberg 1985: 529). For HC, Christ and the Spirit turn me ec-centrally so that I find myself grounded in the gratuitous divine center.

8 “The Catechism is more than mere doctrine. It is doctrine apprehended and represented continually, in the form of life” (Nevin 1847:129).

8, 56, 70). Indeed, the consuming misdirection that emerges from our vain attempts to banish insecurities and threats is both radical and universal. It skews the whole person, and it insinuates itself into every community and institution. None is righteous.

All social groups – the family, the tribe, the clan, the ethnic group, the race, the nation – tend to be proud and selfish (Verhey 1986:23).

Alternatively, they become mired in slothful disengagement.

This is our second lesson. If the catechism's word of comfort and its appreciation for the God of grace support a feeling of assurance, an ec-centric trajectory, and a hopeful visage, its sense for the human fault shapes and expresses a profound sorrow and realism. This aspect of the catechism connects with points made by Reinhold Niebuhr (who was raised in a church shaped by the catechism). We might say the catechism's sense for sin and the human fault underscores chronic human tendencies toward diminishment, injustice, and destruction.

An ethic that proceeds from this remorseful and realistic piety will therefore appreciate the need for balances of power and other restraints. It will be alert to the possibility that every restraint may fail, and that every alignment of power may be manipulated to oppress and abuse. It will also be ready to subject all persons, communities, practices, and institutions to persistent criticism. Moreover, just because this particular strand of piety undercuts self-righteousness, it supports an ethic that appreciates the moral importance of love as forgiveness, or what Niebuhr called "the demand that the evil in the other shall be borne without vindictiveness because the evil in the self is known" – a point whose relevance has been renewed by recent discussions of reconciliation, truth, and justice following protracted civil conflicts in South Africa, Northern Ireland, Latin America, and elsewhere (Niebuhr 1979:137; Biggar 2003).

### 3. CALLED TO A COMMUNITY AND MISSION OF RECONCILIATION

Questions 15 through 18 concern the mediator given "to completely deliver us and make us right with God" (HC 18). The catechism says Christ earns our restoration by bearing God's wrath "against the sin of the whole human race" (HC 37). Indeed, Christ had "to suffer death ... because God's justice and truth require it: nothing else could pay for our sins except the death of the Son of God" (HC 40). Ursinus, a principal author of the catechism, says this means the substance of our comfort is that "we are Christ's and through him reconciled to the Father" (Ursinus 1851:19).

Strictly speaking, however, the catechism does not understand the activity that reconciles and brings us to renewed life to be simply a matter of Christ's atoning work. It is true that "without any merit of my own, out of sheer grace, God grants and credits to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ, as if I had never been a sinner." It is also true that "all I need to do is accept this with a believing heart" (HC 60). But it is the Spirit that produces this faith or acceptance in me. It is the Spirit that creates in us a wholehearted trust in God's free forgiveness (HC 21). Thus, in addition to Christ's atoning work *per se*, "the Spirit is given to me, so that, through faith, he makes me share in Christ and all his benefits" (HC 53). The turning of persons to God therefore involves two related moments: Christ's atoning work, and the Spirit's engrafting of persons into Christ through faith (HC 64). This is how we are redeemed, reconciled, and renewed. This is how, according to the catechism, we become forgiven children who recognize God as our faithful father.<sup>9</sup>

My point here is that, as it participates in the work of redemption, the Spirit also gathers the church. The church is *old* and it *endures*, because – as the catechism says – it is gathered, protected, and preserved "from the beginning of the world to its end." The church is a feature of the word of assurance because it is a community of which, by grace, "I am and always will be a living member" (HC 54).<sup>10</sup> In addition, just because it is old and endures, just because it is the community of the one covenant of grace that extends from Adam to the end, just because it is gathered in a manner that fulfills the promise that in Abraham all families of the earth shall be

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- 9 Does the HC commit an "Anselmic error" by making satisfaction of divine justice the precondition for divine mercy? HC modifies Anselm so that Christ's death does not satisfy God's honor but God's justice (Rohls 1998:91-4). Busch assures us that, in the catechism, "it is not that *God* must clear things up with God's own self. *We* have to be cleared up," although "it would be *unmerciful* if God were not at the same time just" (2010:96-7). Even so, one remembers that, when it comes to the sovereignty of grace, Karl Barth thought Anselm did not go far enough. Does HC wholly escape Barth's concern? "To this view (that God can only forgive on the fulfillment of a prior condition)– in addition to the objections which Anselm himself raised and gave not a very adequate answer – we have to address the following questions. Is the incarnation of God, which is the goal of the whole sequence of Anselm's thought, really no more than the fulfillment of a prior condition which enables God to forgive in a manner worthy of Himself? Is it not the real accomplishment of His pure, absolute and unconditional forgiveness, His forgiveness *sola misericordia*?" (Barth 1956:486-7) The words in brackets are mine.
- 10 Points made strikingly by the Scots Confession when it treats the "true Kirk," or those gathered into the covenant of grace *before* it discusses the incarnation (PCUSA 1996:3.04-5).

blessed, and just because it is gathered in accord with a great commission to go to all nations, the church is also *new*. It is new because, as the catechism says, it is gathered “out of the entire human race” (HC 54). Like the reconciler who crosses barriers and boundaries, and unlike many other communities, the church goes to all families, tribes, and ethnic groups, and nations. The popular hymn quoted by Martin Luther King Jr. in a sermon at Montgomery, Alabama on “Loving Your Enemies,” says, “In Christ, there is no east or west, in him, no south or north” (King 1998:58). Or, as Paul says, no male or female, no slave or free. The catechism insists that here all are obligated to use their gifts “readily and joyfully for the service and enrichment” of others (HC 55).

Thus, the church, as the catechism understands it, approximates what King might have called a community of reconciliation (King 1986:6-8, 12-5). Or, as both the Confession of 1967 and the Belhar Confession put it, the church is a community in which persons “have been reconciled with God and one another” (Naude 2010:219-20; PCUSA 1996:9.07, 9.20). Piet J. Naude, commenting on Belhar, article 2, says “the unity of the church,” a body that brings together people who have been divided and often also in conflict, is “a manifestation of Christ’s reconciliation” (Naudé 2010:8).

The modern statements also emphasize that this community, which embodies a reconciling trajectory precisely because its members are “called from the entire human family,” is itself entrusted with the message and mission of reconciliation (Naude 2010:8). For King, this means that the church should witness to justice and criticize injustice. The Confession of 1967 critiques then-current circumstances through the spectacles of reconciliation and highlights four alienating divisions: (a) the fragmentation of the human family by racial prejudice and discrimination, (b) war in an age of weapons that risk “the annihilation of mankind,” (c) “enslaving poverty in an world of abundance,” and (d) confusion and exploitation in sexual life that diminish relationships of mutual responsibility and care (PCUSA 1996:9.43-7).<sup>11</sup> Belhar affirms that God’s people should “live in a new obedience which can open new possibilities for society and world.” It also says the credibility of the gospel is undermined “when it is proclaimed in a land which professes to be Christian, but in which the enforced separation of people on a racial basis promotes alienation, hatred, and enmity” (Naude 2010:221).

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11 The Confession of 1967 is the only document in the *Book of Confessions* of the Presbyterian Church (USA) that includes an explicit analysis of circumstances calling for moral involvement, and in this it anticipated the emphasis of the Accra Confession on “reading the signs of the times.”

This, then, is lesson three. In conversation with more recent documents, the catechism suggests a sense of having been called to participate in a community of reconciliation that brings together people in mutual service and that pursues a mission of reconciliation. This lends a particular quality to our ec-centric, hopeful and realistic piety. It calls for an ethic that envisions an inclusive, welcoming church crossing barriers and challenging injustices as it witnesses to God's renewing possibility and purpose.

A contemporary corollary, I think, is that, in the spirit of what John Dominic Crossan calls Jesus' "open commensality," (Jesus eats and drinks with all the wrong people) the church should practice a discipline of inclusion, especially when it celebrates the Lord's Supper (Crossan 1992:261-4). This surely was a strong implication of Belhar (Naude 2010:33, 100, 152-3), and here, let me return briefly to the matter that motivated the Presbyterian Church (USA) to commission a new translation of the catechism. The decision to do so raised a question of polity, namely, whether the procedure for adopting a new translation should be the same as for adopting a new confession, or approval by two thirds of the church's presbyteries? But the substantive point that lay behind the decision – an impetus toward an intentional (and perhaps also joyful) bias toward inclusion – has its basis in the fundamental logic of grace, reconciliation, renewal, and church.

#### **4. A DISTINCTIVE REASON FOR BEING MORAL AND A DISTINCTIVE ATTITUDE TOWARD PRINCIPLES AND NORMS**

The catechism treats good works, the commandments, and prayer in its third part under the rubric of thankfulness. The experience of grace in Christ and the Spirit calls forth a thankful response; grace evokes gratitude. An ethicist should note that this dynamic yields a distinctive reason of heart and mind for being moral and a distinctive attitude toward action guiding principles or norms (Gustafson 1975:82).

Question 86, which says we should "do good works so that we may show ... we are thankful to God for his benefits," needs to be understood in conjunction with the claim in Question 1 that Christ "makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready ... to live for him." According to the catechism, gratitude or thankfulness is a primary reason for being moral, a sensibility of a person touched by grace that disposes her to take up a new and ec-centric direction in life.

By contrast, for example, in America today, one often hears that we ought to be moral because virtue brings strength to individuals and to the

nation, or because virtue brings tangible rewards, or because salvation and fulfilment are rewards for being good. These seem like “common sense” in a culture that seeks to legitimate wealth, commercial success, and imperial strength. Interestingly, each is a variation on the prevalent claim that our commitment to self-realization is the primary reason of mind and heart for engaging in a life of moral seriousness.

Consider Question 64: Does the teaching that good works merit nothing “make people indifferent and wicked?” This echoes a Reformation-era criticism of grace-alone Protestants, and if the only engine for moral seriousness were our commitment to our own self-realization and fulfilment, the answer would surely be “yes.” The catechism, however, answers, “No,” because “it is impossible for those engrafted into Christ through true faith not to produce fruits of gratitude.” But *why* should this be impossible? Naudé says a kind of necessity accompanies grace.

The faithful *must* bear fruit ... The impossible possibility is to receive God’s grace” to see “God’s openheartedness in Christ – and then to close one’s own heart to structural injustice and to talk easily about love without corresponding deeds (Naude 2010:207)<sup>12</sup>

Essentially, I agree. For the catechism, the “must” is a function of gratitude; the broader claim is that a perceived debt of gratitude can effectively re-direct the human agent.

“Freely you have received, freely give” (Matt. 10:8, NIV). If this exhortation holds, then the sense of gratitude has imperative dimensions that ground a command in the “isness” of experience.

Out of a sense of gratitude should come a sense for justice. Having received, a people should not take more than is their due; they should not deprive others of life’s resources ... God has freely given life to us; we, in thankfulness to him, are to be concerned for others’ well-being as he has been concerned for ours (Gustafson 1975:101).<sup>13</sup>

Here, we encounter a religious reason to care for others, and one implication of the claim for an imperative dimension of gratitude is that religious bases for moral seriousness cannot be reduced to self-realization or self-love. Indeed, we need not reduce *all* religiously connected reasons of mind and heart for being moral *only* to gratitude. Like the Catechism, we may also appeal to other heartfelt sensibilities, say of remorse and hope. A

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12 For Reformed confessions, “one cannot say that we are justified *without* good works, although we are not justified *on the basis* of good works” (Rohls 1998:133).

13 Gustafson adds that the goodness of the divine giver is only partly upheld in our experience.

related conclusion, then, is that “rational self-interest” plays too central a role in some other forms of ethics (Gustafson 1975:164). That is, if it is true that gratitude (as well as other sensibilities and emotions) is an effective engine of moral seriousness, then forms of ethics (whether religious or not) that focus entirely on self-realization and self-regard miss or reduce the true emotional depth and complexity of human agency.<sup>14</sup>

Now for a second point: the dynamic of grace and gratitude supports a distinctive attitude toward action-guiding principles and norms. Consider “Do not kill.” The catechism intensifies the prohibition with respect to internal actions and also internal attitudes and emotions.

I am not to belittle, hate, insult, or kill my neighbor – not by my thoughts, my words, my look or gesture and certainly not by actual deeds – and I am not to be a party to this in others; rather I am to put away all desire for revenge (HC 105).

Indeed, “by forbidding murder God teaches us that he hates the root of murder: envy, hatred, anger, vindictiveness” (HC 106). The catechism then turns to positive duties and virtues that correlate with the prohibitions.

Is it enough if we do not murder our neighbor in any such way? No. By condemning envy, hatred, and anger, God wants us to love our neighbors as ourselves, to be patient, peace-loving, gentle, merciful, and friendly toward them, to protect them from harm as much as we can and to do good even to our enemies (HC 107).

We have Jesus’ teaching to thank for the intensified prohibitions and the extensive positive duties. Jan Rohls notes that the placement of the Commandments in this third section also correlates with Reformed understandings of the third use of the law as a positive guide for those justified sinners who have received grace and are turned by gratitude (1998:202-3).<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, as is clear from Questions 3-9 and from the

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14 In response to my presentation Anlené Taljaard of the University of the Free State asked whether our relatedness with others in Christ might also be a reason for being moral. The claim in part Three of the catechism is that thankfulness or gratitude is a chief reason of mind and heart for doing works in accord with the commandments, and this is a classical Protestant claim. The catechism also intimates additional reasons for being moral, though to draw from it “a communion ontology” might be a cognitivist reduction of its vocabulary. Should we speak of a sense of solidarity? In any case, the catechism’s appeals to gratitude, remorse, and solidarity suggest that appeals to rational self-interest play too prominent a role in some forms of ethics.

15 The placement is analogous to reading the law following an assurance of pardon – something Calvin commends in his Strassburg “Form of Church

intensified prohibitions and radicalized positive duties in Questions 94-113, the accusatory use of the law has not been left behind. No one, including the converted, can obey these commandments perfectly (HC 114).

Significantly, the dynamic of grace and gratitude accompanies the radicalization of both the prohibitions and the positive duties. With respect to the law's accusatory use, which remains in place and continues to furnish a standard for criticism, this dynamic enables people to acknowledge the intensive and radical meaning of the law without falling into despair. Why? Because by grace one's worth has already been secured. With respect to the third use, this same dynamic allows persons to take up the project of pursuing an ec-centric life of love for neighbours and even enemies, while also acknowledging the ways in which they fall short. Thus, the piety shaped and expressed by the dynamic of grace and gratitude acknowledges that action-guiding principles and norms undercut self-righteousness, but nevertheless also allows us to pursue a life of moral seriousness with "dirty hands."<sup>16</sup>

## 5. A CRITICISM AND A CONCLUSION

Our conversation with the catechism has yielded four lessons. 1) A Protestant theological ethic proceeds from a piety or deep disposition that includes a sense of acceptance or assurance and turns people toward an eccentric manner of living. 2) This piety includes a sense of sorrow, remorse, and fault; it is therefore realistic as well as hopeful, and it supports an ethic that subjects all persons, communities, and institutions to persistent criticism. 3) Protestant piety includes a sense of having been engrafted into a community of reconciliation, and thus a bias toward inclusion that challenges barriers and injustices. 4) It furnishes a distinctive reason for being moral (thankfulness or gratitude) that has implications for understanding human agency, and it enables persons to be guided by intensified principles and norms even as they acknowledge that they live with "dirty hands."

Now we must also register a criticism. Today, we know the terrible price of regarding the natural world solely in terms of its utility for us.<sup>17</sup> The

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Prayers," though in his *Institutes*, he treats the Commandments, including the "third and principal" use of the law, before his treatment of regeneration (Thompson 1962:198).

16 Question 15 makes both points. The commandments are "preached so pointedly ... so that ... we may come to know our sinfulness ... [and] so that, we may never stop striving" (Comparison of Heidelberg Catechism nd).

17 Holmes Rolston, III criticizes views of the environment as "secondary to human interests," and argues that nature has intrinsic value (1998:1-2,192-245). Rosemary

catechism cannot be faulted for failing to anticipate the current ecological crisis, but it should also be noted that, in this regard, its discussion of creation is problematic. For example, statements about the first article of the Creed in Questions 26 through 28 focus on how God's governance leaves nothing to chance, so that "we can have good confidence in our faithful God and Father that nothing in creation will separate us from his love." The creation theme is largely absorbed by the theme of *our* comfort in life and in death.

There are other anthropocentric currents in Reformation theology – for example, Luther likened creation to a house expressly built for humans, and Calvin makes similar statements (Luther 1958:35-9, 47, 72; Calvin 1960:161-2, 180, 181-2).<sup>18</sup> But Calvin also says the universe is "a dazzling theatre" of God's wisdom and glory, a "symphony" of praise that shows "the glory of God is everywhere to be seen" (1960:61, 179; 1998b:304). Jonathan Edwards, elaborates these sentiments as he considers the manifestation of God's perfections, greatness, and excellence in creation, and the beauty of the world (1989:493-502; 1980:305-6). This theocentric, almost aesthetic strand in Reformed theologies of creation resists the utilitarian reduction of the natural world to raw material for human production, but it is missing from the catechism. Were it added, it would expand the focus beyond *our* comfort, and perhaps represent a challenge to the catechism's basic theology. However, it could be integrated with the logic of grace and gratitude in order to sculpt and express a more vital creation piety. It would then ground in thankfulness an obligation to be concerned for the well being of "this magnificent theatre of heaven and earth" in which we are blessed to participate (Calvin 1998a:106). Thus, in good Protestant fashion, even as we learn from our forebears, we do not receive their teaching uncritically (PCUSA 1996:3.20).<sup>19</sup>

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Radford Ruether notes that on one Christian view, "animal and plant life can be exploited at will by humans as our possession" (1994:31, 47). Wendell Berry is also concerned with our attitude toward creation and the natural world (2000).

- 18 In response to my paper Nadia Marais of Stellenbosch University asked whether a certain anthropocentrism isn't inevitable, since all that we know we know as humans and in a human perspective. The trick I think is to distinguish the epistemological fact that all human knowing is human from the idea that what is good or of use for humans is the sole standard for what is good and valuable. Humans know many things but some things they know, e.g. that the cosmos is some 14 billion years old and 28 billion light years in diameter, indicate that the world is not centered on humans in the way that Luther's image of creation as a house is.
- 19 In his response to my presentation Willem Fourie of Pretoria University noted that belonging to Christ displaces egoistic individualism, presses us to keep others in mind, and thus not to use resources disproportionately for ourselves.

Particularly on the catechism's 450<sup>th</sup> birthday, however, it seems appropriate to make a further point. Within months of its appearance, this remarkable document, which has continued to shape and express a vibrant piety for generations, was subjected to strident criticism. Nearby Lutheran princes denounced the catechism, and especially its understanding of the Lord's Supper. Frederick the Elector, who commissioned the catechism and took an active hand in its development, found himself having to defend his orthodoxy at the Diet of Augsburg in 1566, and Ursinus was expelled from the Palatinate in 1576 (Bierma: 2013:119). Contemporary scholars note that this rocky reception probably led earlier interpreters to miss the catechism's ecumenical weaving together of elements from Melancthon, Calvin, and Bullinger, and to view it mistakenly as "a purely Reformed text."<sup>20</sup> But perhaps we can snatch from it a final, if also unintended lesson: good theology and ethics are not always happily received.

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The catechism may therefore help to address the current ecological crisis. This point is important in opposition to commercial-industrial understandings of self-interest. However, in my judgment, the catechism still needs supplementing by a theological vision that does not reduce creation to its utility for humans (even for many humans). This is a promise of talk about creation as "the theatre of God's glory." We participate in this theatre, but God's glory does not reduce to the human – a Calvinist and Edwardsian point that requires concern for *our* "only comfort" to be set within a broader creation context than the catechism articulates.

- 20 "Because of the Lutheran opposition and suppression of the Philippistic wing in Lutheranism, the Heidelberg Catechism, against its intention, was from then on not regarded as a document of union, but as a purely Reformed text" (Busch 2010:17). Bierma argues that the catechism is an ecumenical "grafting of Reformed branches onto a Lutheran vine" (2013:11).

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