

WEIGHTIER MATTERS

An Essay Concerning the Tendency of Conservative Presbyterians, And the American Church At-Large, to Neglect Ministries of Justice and Mercy

Part 1 of 4

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Revelation 3:14–22

“To the angel of the church of Laodicea write: These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God’s creation. I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are luke-warm – neither hot nor cold – I am about to spit you out of my mouth. You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see. Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent. Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne. He who has ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

- *Words of warning and hope spoken by Christ, the faithful and true witness, to the church of Laodicea, who, like the American church, believed she was the “richest” church of her day.*

Part One

Although I affirm that the true church of Christ has always included members of the Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant traditions, I’m especially glad that I belong to the reformed branch of the Protestant tradition because, historically, two of our guiding doctrines have been *sola Scriptura* (Scripture alone) and *semper reformada* (always reforming). This means we recognize that our theology and practice will never be perfectly biblical so we must continually return to Scripture as our sole standard (*sola Scriptura*) in our never-ending need to reform (*semper reformada*) our theology and praxis to make them more Godly. These two doctrines are very important because they serve to both protect and correct the church. They protect us from something the church is prone to in every generation - the habit of defining righteousness according to strict, extra biblical standards. A good example of this is when Sheldon Vanauken, author of *A Severe Mercy*, returned to America after studying abroad only to discover that his American brothers and sisters in Christ were certain that drinking alcohol was unchristian-like behavior. Sheldon, who became a Christian while studying at Oxford and often went to the local pub with C.S. Lewis, couldn’t figure out where they got the notion that drinking alcohol was a sin because it certainly was not prohibited in the Bible¹. I’m sure you

¹ Of course the teachings of 1 Cor. 8 should be taken in to account if you drink alcohol.

can think of many other extra-biblical standards that are prevalent in the church today but this essay, however, is going to focus on the correcting rather than the protecting aspect of these two principles.

If you've ever attended various churches for any length of time, you know that each church, or denomination, seems to concentrate on different aspects of faith or even different portions of Scripture. For example, some churches in West Virginia really focus on the last couple of verses in the book of Mark and thus during the service you may find yourself holding a hymnal in one hand and a rattlesnake in the other. Other churches provide an hour during services so that members can corporately share what they feel has been a prophecy that God has given them. This begs the question 'Where do we as conservative Presbyterian's focus?' We focus where 95% of all conservative, American, Protestant Churches focus — at the pulpit. We center on the preaching of the word². I know we worship through song and we might even participate in a time of corporate sharing but most of our time is spent hearing the preached word. Studying Scripture has also dominated our time of small group and individual spiritual cultivation. Yet despite all of our time and effort spent concentrating on Scripture the lifestyles of American Christians are essentially indistinguishable from those of non-Christians. This is most evident when comparing attitudes and practices between believers and nonbelievers concerning money and material possessions³. New Testament scholar Craig Blomberg notes, "In most affluent or suburban Western communities, it is impossible to detect any outward differences between the expenditures of professing Christians and the religiously unaffiliated who surround them in their neighborhoods⁴." Our fruitlessness is not due to the moral inertia of the Clinton administration nor the liberal media — two popular whipping posts for evangelical Christians. We must never believe that the ungodly behavior of those outside the Church is responsible for the immoral behavior in the Church. Nor must we believe that God is unable to bless his people due to the immorality of the culture in which they live. I propose that one of the reasons, if not the most significant reason, why we bear little fruit is because **God will not bless the American church when it is unwilling to sacrifice for the purpose of providing justice and mercy for the defenseless and needy**. We must at least partially assume that the power of our prayers for growth and blessing is severely diminished due to our neglect.⁵ This is where the principle of correction comes in. We must return to Scripture again so that we can correct our understanding of righteousness. I believe that there are at least four passages which are given to epitomize/summarize righteousness, i.e., to know God: Jeremiah 22:16⁶, Micah 6:8⁷, Matthew 22:35-40⁸ and James 1:27⁹. These passages reveal

² I purposely excluded the Eucharist because I estimate that at most only 1 Protestant church in 10 practices weekly sacramental worship.

³The average American gives between 1.6 and 2.16% of their income to charity. American Christians give an average of 2.4%. Also, the poor consistently give a higher percentage than the rich. For a more in-depth analysis see *Neither Poverty nor Riches: A Biblical Theology of Material Possession* by Craig Blomberg. Eerdmans Publishing: Grand Rapids, 1999.

⁴ Blomberg p. 20.

⁵ Later I will discuss how the Bible teaches that the effectiveness of prayer exists on a continuum.

⁶ "Where God then is known, kindness to man also appears. So also on the other hand we may conclude, that all regard for God is extinguishable and all fear of his is abolished, when men wilfully [sic] do wrong to one another, and when they seek to oppress or defraud one another." Commentaries on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah and The Lamentations. John Calvin. Translated by John Owen. Vol. 3. Baker: Grand Rapids, 1996, p. 104.

⁷ "What God wants is a heart response to God demonstrated in the basic elements of true religion. God has told the people what is good. The Mosaic law differentiated between good and bad and reflected God's will in their religious and social lives. They were to act 'justly' (GK 5477), here in the sense of 'true religion,' i.e., the ethical response to God that has a manifestation in social concerns as well. 'To love mercy [GK 2876]' is freely and willingly to show kindness to others. 'To walk

the desires of God's heart as well as identify and describe cardinal characteristics of his kingdom on earth.

Where did we go wrong? Early church writings demonstrate that charity was not only highly esteemed but was considered a core spiritual discipline. Didache 15:4 identifies charity and prayer as equal Christian responsibilities. II Clement 16:4 asserts that, 'Almsgiving therefore is a good thing, even as repentance from sin. Fasting is better than prayer, but almsgiving than both...for almsgiving lifts off the burden of sin.'¹⁰ Centuries later, the reformers designated the three marks of the church as the preaching of the word, the correct administration of the sacraments, and church discipline¹¹. I truly believe that these three characteristics should serve as marks of the church but they are not sufficient for our time. Although the affirmation of these three marks apparently did not cause most churches in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries to neglect the call and practice of mercy¹², history will most likely not make the same conclusion of our day. **One means of correction would be to affirm that protecting and providing for the poor is a mark of the church. Scripture contains too many passages about ministries of justice and mercy (here after MJM) not to include this practice as a mark of the church**¹³.

humbly [GK 7570] with your God' means to live in conscious fellowship with him, exercising a spirit of humility before him. The prophet was not indicating that sacrifice was completely ineffectual and that simply a proper heart attitude to God would suffice. Rather, God has no interest in the multiplication of empty religious acts." Zondervan NIV Bible Commentary: An Abridgement of The Expositor's Bible Commentary. Vol. 1: Old Testament. Edited by Kenneth L. Barker and John R. Kohlenberger III. Micah. Thomas E. McComiskey. Zondervan: Grand Rapids. 1994, p. 1478.

⁸ "It is not unlikely that Jesus' hearers were expecting one or other of the Ten Commandments, those that had been written by the finger of God and that, as a group, stood out over all the other commandments. But Jesus did not select one of those. Instead he chose the commandment to love God... Jesus was asked for but one commandment, but, he goes further and adds 'a second' that, he says, 'is like it.' Wholehearted love for God means coming in some measure to see other people as God sees them, and all people as the objects of God's love. Therefore anyone who truly loves God with all his being must and will love others, and this is expressed in the commandment, 'You shall love your neighbor as your self,'... The Gospel According to Matthew. Leon Morris. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids. 1992. P. 563.

⁹ "We would badly misunderstand these verses were we to think that James is intending to summarize here all that true worship of God should involve. As Calvin say, '[James] does not define generally what religion is, but reminds us that religion without the things he mentions is nothing.'... Isaiah, in a passage similar in many ways to these verses in James, announces that God will no longer recognize the worship his people offer him; they must repent and 'seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the cause of the widow' (Isa. 1:10-17). In these actions, the people of Israel were to imitate God himself, 'a Father to the fatherless and defender of widows (Ps. 68:5)'... One test of pure religion, therefore, is the degree to which we extend aid to the 'helpless' in our world – whether they be widows and orphans, immigrants trying to adjust to a new life, impoverished third-world dwellers, the handicapped or the homeless." The Letter of James: The Pillar New Testament Commentary. Douglas Moo. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids. 2000, p. 96-97.

In addition to these four passages, it should also be noted that Job appealed to his compassion for the poor in his climatic closing defense of his righteousness (29: 7-17; 30:25; 31:13-23, 32).

¹⁰Evangelical Dictionary of Theology. Edited by Walter A. Elwell. Baker Books: Grand Rapids, 1984, p. 35.

¹¹ In his systematic theology, Berkhof cites article XXIX in the WCF as evidence that the Westminster divines affirmed these three marks. He also names Hyperius, Martyr, Ursinus, Trelcatius, Heidegger and Wendelinus as other reformers who defined the church according to these three marks. Systematic Theology. Louis Berkhof. Eerdmans Publishing: Grand Rapids, 1996, p. 576.

¹² Keller, Tim. Ministries of Mercy: The Call of the Jericho Road. Second Edition. P&R Publishing: Phillipsburg. 1997, p. 69.

¹³ We would do well to listen to the teaching of Dr. Simon Kistemaker, a devoutly reformed theologian: "Primary tasks of the church are to preach the gospel, to administer the sacraments, and to care for the poor." Kistemaker, Simon. New Testament Commentary: Exposition of James, Epistles, John, Peter and Jude. Baker Books: Grand Rapids. 1996, p. 66.

In addition to the insufficiency of the historical marks of the church, I believe another, more contemporary, reason for our neglect of the destitute is the ever increasing tendency in the evangelical community towards theological minimalism¹⁴. We evangelicals have nearly reduced the totality of our Christian faith and practice down to the contents of the “sinner’s prayer.” In doing so we have emphasized the fact that a) all people have sinned b) even the slightest of our sins separates us from God c) we can do nothing to earn our salvation and d) we are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. Though this teaching is delightful, important and true, it distorts the reality that a) God doesn’t feel the same way about all sin¹⁵ and b) all of Scripture demonstrates that true faith always produces fruit of compassion¹⁶. Put differently, some things matter more to God than others, and he judges our *deeds* both in life and in death¹⁷. For example, the “expert in the law” asks Jesus about the greatest commandment¹⁸. His question suggests that some commandments are of greater importance¹⁹. Again in Matthew, Jesus rebukes the teachers of the law because although they give a tenth of their spices they “neglected the more important matters of the law,” which happen to include justice and mercy²⁰. Who can deny that we have become focused, if not obsessed, with “spices” such as group Bible study, Scripture memorization, conferences and brief prayer before meals? If sociologists studied the habits of an average American Christian in an effort to identify the most important teachings and practice of the faith, I doubt MJM would even be considered. I can think of four scenarios, three of which are personal, that I believe demonstrate how the American church has lost sight of the weightier matters. First, as a child I got spanked when I swore but I received no punishment when it became obvious that I was stealing money from the jar that held the tithe money from my allowance²¹. Second, one evening during my first week of serving as a youth minister in a small church, I coincidentally encountered an older man who was standing outside the church doors. Upon seeing me he recognized me as the new youth pastor and hastily tried to hide the cigarette he was smoking

¹⁴ See Mere Confessionalism. Nicotine Theological Journal. January 1999. C. Lindsay Palmetto. P. 2.

¹⁵ The Westminster divines affirmed the belief that not all transgressions of God’s law are equally heinous (WLC 150).

¹⁶ After hearing John the Baptist’s announcement and warning about God’s imminent fulfillment of His salvific promise, the crowd in Luke 3 asked, “What should we do then?” John didn’t answer, “stop swearing” or “attend ‘church’ more often.” He told them to share food and clothing and to stop extorting money from the powerless. Who today would ever think of giving such an answer? Such language is clearly absent from our “sinner’s prayer.” What is also absent from the sinner’s prayer is the wholistic notion of gospel, i.e., gospel includes more than the forgiveness of sins. Gospel means the exile is over and the restoration of all things has begun on earth as it is in heaven. If our understanding of gospel does not have an eschatological dimension than we are preaching what the apostle Paul describes as “another” gospel.

¹⁷ The New Testament alone provides ample evidence: Matthew 7:2; Luke 6:37; 1 Cor. 3:12, 11:32; James 3:1, 5:9, Rev. 2:2, 2:19, 2:23, 3:1, 3:8, 3: 15, 20:12, 20:13.

¹⁸ Matt. 22:35-36.

¹⁹ It’s important to note that Scripture never suggests an either/or mentality concerning obedience towards the lighter and weightier matters of the law, rather we should “practice that latter without neglecting the former (Matt. 23:23).” Also, it’s interesting to note that in addition to a continuum concerning the importance of the commandments, 1 Cor. 3:11-12 and Matt. 11:20-24 suggests that aspects salvation and damnation exist on a continuum. Scripture teaches that every elect person is made completely righteous in Christ and yet these verses in 1 Cor. say that some will barely escape the flames of judgement which implies that others “escape” with a little more distance between themselves and the flames of judgement. The Matthew passage states that some people will experience a more bearable judgement as compared to others. Later I will discuss the teaching of various levels of heavenly rewards.

²⁰ Matt. 23:23.

²¹ Reflecting on this event, I commend my parents for modeling compassionate generosity for me. No matter what their response was toward my greed, they led by example.

behind his back while shamefully apologize for smoking²². Third, recently an acquaintance of mine, Tammy, told another acquaintance of mine, Sara, that she was romantically interested in my close friend, Mark. Sara, knowing that Mark was more serious about his faith than Tammy was of hers, warned Tammy, "Mark is a godly man." Tammy replied, "That's ok, I can stop swearing²³." Perhaps the best example may be in the practices of the popular and often controversial preacher, Tony Campolo. He has told many congregations, "8,000 children in Africa will starve during the upcoming week and you don't give a sh**." He continued by saying, "what is even more disturbing is that fact that you're more upset about my language than you are about the welfare of those children." So true. **According to Scripture, Christians should make those outside the church uneasy about their checking account than about smoking, drinking or cussing.**

An enormous shift in priorities and affections must take place if the American church is going to reform itself according to the word and Spirit of God. First, we must pray that the affections of our hearts would be changed so that we would become sensitive to the neglected and powerless in our communities. As this happens I believe that prayers of repentance will follow. Second, we must acknowledge and work through our fears of shifting more of our time and resources toward MJM and away from the study of Scripture. Third, we must learn to model our compassion according to Scripture, learning who the neglected are and what God expects from us.

It would be no small gift from God if he did change our hearts. I have no doubt that millions of church-goers in America give to charity and take no pleasure in the suffering of others but we must be willing to engage at a deeper level. We must begin to personally associate with the neglected as well as give more from our abundance. Friendship/association with the destitute is the essence of almsgiving²⁴. An overwhelming majority of us have no contact with these people. Our financial and social status allows us to conduct our daily lives without having to relate with them. If we do cross paths with someone in need we often become immensely uncomfortable and struggle to know what is the correct course of action. Having lived in small-town Iowa until the age of 22, I had never encountered a beggar until I moved to Orlando, Florida two years later. During my first visit to the local grocery store a beggar stopped me on my way out and asked me to give him money so that he could buy food. I wanted to ignore him and get into my car as fast as possible. I knew that if I talked with him there was a possibility that he could embarrass me by doing or saying something inappropriate. The possibility of embarrassment exists every time I relate with a person in need. This is only one of many fears that we must surrender to Christ. Ministering to the destitute will bring personal suffering and force us past our comfort zones. We must pray for courage and a willingness to put our egos on the line. We desperately need God's grace to open our eyes so that we can see our own immense wealth, the needs of others and give with a cheerful heart.

²² I became good friends with this man. From a moral standpoint, his smoking never bothered me, even less so as I learned about his financial and personal commitment to a local ministry that provided housing for recently paroled prisoners and their families. How is it that the Church has caused people to be more ashamed about smoking as compared to our unwillingness to significantly sacrifice for the sake of helping others?

²³ I've used fake names in this example.

²⁴ Introducing the New Testament: Its Literature and Theology. Paul J. Achtemeier, Joel B. Green, Marianne Meyer Thompson. Eerdmans Publishing: Grand Rapids, 2001.

Second, we must admit and work through our fears about shifting more of our energies away from Scripture and towards mercy ministries. First, let me affirm my commitment to Scripture. I embrace it as a gift from God to his people. In its totality it contains the gospel, which is the power of God for salvation. It is a faithful and true witness about the triune God and us. God has been and will always be pleased to use it in conjunction with the Holy Spirit to form and mature his people in Christ. The preaching of the word is a means of grace that should not be neglected. Personal study of the word is often very beneficial and should be encouraged. With this said, I also agree with Kenneth Leech when he warns that the things of God can cut us off from God²⁵. Are our Bibles and study groups a stumbling block²⁶? Both Testaments clearly warn that even God given means of grace, i.e., the temple and its accompanying ceremonial practices, can provide a false sense of righteousness as well as being a stench in God's nose when his people are not reflecting his heart by providing justice and mercy²⁷. We must assume that this is also possible for us who live during the new covenant. Our religious practices will nauseate God as long as we neglect the weightier matters of the law.

A seminary classmate of mine gave a short presentation about his views concerning the different components of ministry. He identified three perspectives: cognitive, emotional, and behavioral. Reflecting on his past ministry experience, he noted that he had focused almost exclusively on the cognitive, specifically learning and teaching Christian doctrine. The behavioral element was delegated to special occasions such as going on short-term mission trips. I don't recall what he said about the emotional element, but in light of fact that he had ministered in Presbyterian churches I doubt any resources were spent on that perspective. My classmate wanted to change the disproportionate nature of his past ministry efforts. We should also desire to change. Why does the idea of spending less time studying Scripture scare us and sound heretical? I propose that one of the reasons why we are scared is that we do not want to compromise the importance of Christ's atonement. We are reacting against theologically liberal churches and denominations which often offer only humanistic solutions towards suffering while neglecting Christ's call for repentance and faith. Our reaction is to affirm Christ through preaching, worship and bible study. We, of course, are right to affirm Christ but we forgotten that he is just as interested in justice as he is in justification²⁸. Acts 6:1-

²⁵ See *True Prayer: An Invitation to Christian Spirituality* (Morehouse, 1995) p. 19.

²⁶ In addition to the primary intention of my question, i.e., do Bible study groups keep us from weightier matters?, I believe groups are a stumbling block in a secondary way by encouraging a phenomena called evangelical egalitarianism. This is the practice of group members sharing their individual gleanings from a passage and accepting each members interpretation as being equally valid. In addition to often leading to boredom, this practice discourages group members from investigating the insights of more learned people such as commentators. I am in no way denying that an individual can obtain a saving knowledge of God without the mediation of a commentator or pastor/priest, rather the fullness of a text is inevitably missed without the aid of a competent and trustworthy commentator or teacher. I personally believe that the time given towards group Bible study can be better spent through MJM or spiritual aid groups (see my future article *Freud, Orcs and Sovereign Grace* for a better understanding of spiritual aid groups). Affirming the doctrine of the-priesthood-of-all-believers (the belief that all Christians have equal access to God's throne through prayer and that that access does not require mediation through a church leader; 1 Pet. 2:9; Heb. 10:19-25, 12: 22-24) does not make necessary the affirmation that every believer is an equally responsible and able teacher.

²⁷ Jeremiah 7:4; Is. 1:13

²⁸ Christianity Today. Basic Stott: Candid Comments on Justice, Gender, and Judgement. Roy McCloughry. January 8, 1996, p. 25-32.

4 teaches us that the ministries of word and deed are equal in status as evidenced by the fact that the Greek word *diakonia* is used to describe both²⁹. A second reason for our fear may stem from the fact that our theological focus, both historically and currently, is on teaching and preaching doctrine, specifically the doctrine of sovereign grace. Most reformed church members hover around Biblical passages that affirm God's sovereign grace because that is where their pastors hover. We spend tremendous amounts of resources defending and teaching this doctrine. At least one of our confessions, the Canons of Dort, was written for the sole purpose of defending the doctrine of sovereign grace and other confessions such as the Westminster Confession contain numerous statements pertaining to this doctrine³⁰. Despite the fact that two-thirds of the Westminster Confession is an exposition of the 10 commandments, i.e., the Christian life, the reformed community is still characterize by its teaching and defending of doctrine, especially the doctrine of election, rather than acts of mercy³¹. I believe the doctrine of sovereign grace is precious³² and should be defended with all diligence but those who need our charity the most, along with God himself, will not care about the correctness of our doctrine if it's not accompanied by our obedience to the weightier matters. As the African proverb states, "An empty belly has no ears." We must admit and talk about our obsession with teaching and learning doctrine at the expense of MJM. **American Presbyterianism has a history of teaching wonderful doctrine while ignoring the injustices that exist under its nose.** In his book, *Black and Presbyterian: The Heritage and the Hope*, Gayraud Wilmore describes American Presbyterianism in the 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries. The 1789 General Assembly provided the venue for the first official discussion of slavery by American Presbyterians. But in unfortunately typical Presbyterian fashion they discussed the importance catechizing of slaves rather than their emancipation. Wilmore writes,

²⁹ Blomberg p. 168.

³⁰ One of the sociological factors which contributed to the necessity of the Westminster Confession was the Council of Trent's precise definitions of Roman Catholic theology. Through the Westminster Confession the reformed community responded to Trent by meticulously communicating the doctrine which is at the heart of the Catholic/Protestant conflict -- the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone and the underlining requisite of sovereign election.

³¹ I can remember Dr. Bruce Waltke commenting on the Westminster Confession during one of my classes. He said that it was a good summation of Paul's theology but he questioned how well it represented Micah's theology. In another class, Dr. Mark Futato, a colleague of Dr. Waltke, unknowingly supported Waltke's opinion. He reminded the class that Reformed theology 'cuts its teeth on the Pauline letters,' implying that the Confession's repetitious defense of election is reflective of Paul's numerous teachings on election. It's unfortunate that the reformed community doesn't teach Paul's call for charity with equal vigor. Word searches conducted on The Nicene Creed, The Apostles Creed, The Scots Confession, The Heidelberg Catechism, The Second Helvetic Confession, The Westminster Confession, The Confession of 1967 (PCUSA), and A Brief Statement of Faith (PCUSA), reveal that only The Second Helvetic Confession (Chapters 22, 26, 28,30), The Confession of 1967 (Parts 1 &2), and particularly A Brief Statement of Faith call attention to the discipline of MJM. It is important to note that although Micah 6:8 is used four times as a proof text in the WLC (Questions 91,95,104 and 192) the call for providing justice and mercy is never explicitly mentioned. In fact, the words: poor, widow, orphan, prisoner and alien are never used in the confession. The word "mercy" is used 18 times but never in reference to providing for the disenfranchised. The word "justice" is used in the WCF (23.2) as an admonishment for Christian civil leaders to promote justice. Thankfully it used in the WLC (141, 144, 145) to explain the 8th and 9th commandments. In his exposition of WLC question 91 ("What is the duty which God requireth of man?"), Johannes Vos states that "If our real motive is a desire to serve God, so that we serve our fellow man not just for their own sake, but for God's sake, then we may be truly serving God." (Vos, Johannes. *The Westminster Larger Catechism*. Edited by G.I. Williamson. P&R: Phillipsburg. 2002, p. 221). Vos' exposition is unfortunate because a) it implies that we are able to neatly categorize our motives b) it implies that we are capable of pure motives c) it suggests that if we are unable to do a and b we are not truly serving God while serving others.

³² I hope to demonstrate the importance and beauty of election in a future article titled, *Freud, Orcs and Sovereign Grace*.

“It was becoming increasingly clear to [Blacks] that the Presbyterian Church condemned slavery in theory and condoned it in practice...The more white Presbyterians tiptoed around the outright repudiation of slaveholding Christians, the more their consciences drove them to the next best thing – bringing the poor slaves to Jesus and preparing them for membership in the Presbyterian Church by religious instruction. In other words, ‘doing good for poor Black folk’ easily became an acceptable substitute for emancipating them... *No church was more high-sounding and profound in its Biblical and theological analysis of slavery and did less about it* (emphasis mine)³³.”

Wilmore cites Samuel Cornish, a Black Presbyterian minister who wrote about his experience at an 1837 Presbytery meeting:

“I have seen a [Black] minister of Jesus Christ sitting in Presbytery, with his white brethren in the ministry, who, though it had been announced that full provision was made among the church members for every brother...yet [was] left by himself in the church for three successive days, without dinner or tea, because no Christian family could be found in the congregation, who would admit him to their table, on account of his color³⁴.”

The Emancipation Proclamation did not end such open racism. As late as 1904, leaders in the Cumberland Presbyterian denomination were making statements such as: “As a race [Blacks] are inferior to the whites in culture, mental and moral development, and civilization; and for this reason they have a peculiar claim upon the stronger race for help and guidance³⁵.” We are only fooling ourselves if we believe that similar attitudes no longer plague American Presbyterianism. Wilmore concludes, “Whatever can be said assuredly about Black people and the Presbyterian Church it cannot be said that they come together naturally³⁶.” Although the lack of minority members remains a huge issue for a vast majority of conservative reformed churches³⁷, the reason I’ve cited Wilmore is to again emphasize our pattern of ignoring the weightier matters of the law in our obsession of doctrine. What if Bible study groups became MJM groups that provided for the poor in their community? **Perhaps the spiritual blessings and growth we are hoping for through our emphasis on studying Scripture will be given by God as we become agents of mercy and justice³⁸?**

Concerning confessions and creeds, I’m all for theological maximalism in contrast to the current trend of theological minimalism. I believe it is important that the Reformed community possess agreed upon doctrines that can guide us and provide a barrier against heresy, but we

³³ Wilmore, Gayraud. *Black and Presbyterian: The Heritage and the Hope*. P. 62-63.

³⁴ Wilmore p. 62.

³⁵ Wilmore p. 70.

³⁶ Wilmore page unknown.

³⁷ To my knowledge only the PCUSA has an official counsel, Black Presbyterians United, which address the needs of Black Presbyterians.

³⁸ Many of us in reformed churches downplay the reality that our actions have the possibility of persuading our sovereign God towards mercy and renewal. His bestowing of blessings and curses is often contingent upon obedience, or lack of obedience, to his will. See *Historical Contingencies and Biblical Predictions* by Richard Pratt. *The Way of Wisdom: Essays in Honor of Bruce K. Waltke*. Edited by Packer and Soderlund. Zondervan Publishing: Grand Rapids, 2000, p. 180 – 203.

must understand the nature and common use of a theological maximal confession such as the Westminster Confession. As much as we would like to consider the Westminster Confession as a devotional tool, it is rarely used that way. It simply wasn't written that purpose³⁹. I believe its most common and best use is as a reference tool and thus its contents remain largely unknown to the average lay person just as there are a significant number of words in a dictionary whose meanings are unknown until a situation arises which requires knowledge of a specific word. The Heidelberg Catechism, which was written for the express purpose of educating children⁴⁰, is superior as a faithfully reformed devotional tool. The disadvantage of the Westminster Confession, Heidelberg Catechism and other large confessions are their size. We may all know the answer to the first question of the WSC and the Heidelberg Catechism but who knows the answer to question 76 or even question 2? I believe a confession set to music is the best way to memorize and communicate a statement of faith⁴¹. We can take our lead from the late Rich Mullins and his song *Creed*⁴². Music is also a beautiful and effective way to learn doctrine⁴³. With the exception of two clauses, the PC (USA)'s A Brief Statement of Faith⁴⁴ could be used as lyrics. What then should we do with our traditional creeds and confessions? John Leith provides a good approach to the Westminster Confession: "As a historical achievement, the Westminster Confession should be neither [idolized] nor rejected. It should be accepted for what it is, a remarkable theological achievement of the Reformed community in the seventeenth century, and received with gratitude for the guidance that it may give for the theological task today⁴⁵." The Westminster Confession has accomplished its original purpose and then some but it is time for a maximal reformed confession for the 21st century. Certainly the Westminster Confession can be improved upon⁴⁶. I believe it is time for the more conservative reformed communities such as the OPC, PCA, ARP and CRC to follow the PC(USA) and RCA by producing newer confessions and creeds which build upon the merits of past confessions but attempt to redistribute their theological focus to include more of perhaps Micah's theology.

³⁹ This is not to say that there is no pastoral value in the confession. Chapter 18 of the Confession of Faith has been a great benefit to me.

⁴⁰ "We have discovered that an important defect in our system is exposed by the fact that young people in both our schools and our churches tend to be lax in their Christian doctrine. Without any established catechism, some receive no instruction, while others are inconsistently taught according to individual plans and judgments. Consequently, too many have grown up without fear of God and knowledge of God's word, or else they have been perplexed with irrelevant and needless questions. Occasionally, they have been burdened with unsound doctrines...

Therefore... we have secured the composition of a summary course of instruction or catechism of our Christian religion according to the word of God... We have done this not only so that young people may be piously and consistently instructed in this Christian doctrine, but also so that pastors and schoolmasters themselves may have a clear and fixed form and standard to follow... " Taken from Fredrick III's preface to the Heidelberg Confession: Heidelberg, Germany, January 19, 1563.

⁴¹ One of my seminary graduation requirements was to pass an examine which tested my knowledge of the WSC. The primary study tool for the examine was an audio cassette on which a select number of WSC answers were put to music. I can still recall many of those tunes and answers.

⁴² See Appendix A

⁴³ At the end of each chapter in his systematics textbook, Dr. Wayne Grudem has included a hymn to complement the teaching found within that particular chapter. See *Systematic Theology* (Zondervan, 1994).

⁴⁴ See Appendix B

⁴⁵ Lieth, John. *Assembly at Westminster: Reformed Theology in the Making*. John Knox Press, 1973, p. 18.

⁴⁶ If you doubt this, consider WSC question 4: "Q: What is God? A: God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth." The Biblical approach to this question isn't What is God? but rather Who is God? God is not an idea (what) but a being (who). Isn't God is love (1 Jhn. 4:8) the most obvious answer to this question?

Lastly, what can we learn from Scripture about our ministry to the neglected? Both testaments have much to teach us about those in need and what God desires concerning our ministry to them. Let's first address the question "Who are the neglected?" Although the Biblical understanding of the destitute includes financial and spiritual elements, there are many other factors that determine a person's status as such. The neglected are better understood as the *disenfranchised*, those whose educational level, gender, legal status, physical health, race, vocation, religious purity and family heritage are such that they are excluded from the popular culture, including the religious culture, in which they live⁴⁷. This definition would also include orphans, aliens and widows as well as those who, like Zacchaeus, are monetarily rich but are relegated to the periphery of society. If Luke's numerous references of women is any indication, it would seemingly also include women⁴⁸. The OT is replete with passages concerning protection and provision for the poor and vulnerable⁴⁹ but, as we will see, the 'poor' seem to have a somewhat different status. Gospel parables and numerous other New Testament texts reiterate God's concern for the poor in the new covenant.

⁴⁷ The Gospel of Luke: NICNT. Joel Green. Eerdmans Publishing: Grand Rapids, 1997, p. 210-211.

⁴⁸ Luke 1:5,6,24,25,26,66; 2:5-7, 16, 19, 22, 33-39, 41, 51; 7:11, 36-50; 8:1-3; 10:38-42; 23:27-31; 23:55 – 24:12. Seminary
Gospels class notes.

⁴⁹ Ex. 23:3,6,11; Lev. 19:10,15; 23:22; 25:35 are just a few.