

CONFESSING  
*with the*  
CATECHISMS:

*A FAITH*  
that  
Speaks to Today

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FOLLOWING CENTURIES *of the* CHRISTIAN CHURCH, when we confess our sins in worship, we confess both the wrong we have done and the good we have left undone. In so doing, we follow a long tradition of deeply considering the full implications of God's commandments, reading them expansively — *never narrowly* — searching out both the positive and negative implications of each for the Christian life.

The Reformed tradition is by no means the only Christian tradition that does this; all Christians must, as we are merely following both the Old and New Testaments, the teaching of Moses and the teaching of our Lord himself. Yet, our Reformed tradition provides an often surprising, even shocking, depth to the practice.

*THE OLD TESTAMENT* envisions a maximal reading of the law, a thirst to apply the principles of God's commands into every area of life, not a mere keeping of the letter of the law. Leviticus 6:1–7 is telling:

*The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "If anyone sins and commits a breach of faith against the LORD by deceiving his neighbor in a matter of deposit or security, or through robbery, or if he has oppressed his neighbor or has found something lost and lied about it, swearing falsely—in any of all the things that people do and sin thereby—if he has sinned and has realized his guilt and will restore what he took by robbery or what he got by oppression*

*or the deposit that was committed to him or the lost thing that he found or anything about which he has sworn falsely, he shall restore it in full and shall add a fifth to it, and give it to him to whom it belongs on the day he realizes his guilt. And he shall bring to the priest as his compensation to the LORD a ram without blemish out of the flock, or its equivalent, for a guilt offering. And the priest shall make atonement for him before the LORD, and he shall be forgiven for any of the things that one may do and thereby become guilty."* (Lev 6:1–7)

Leviticus is clearly working out the implications of the eighth commandment, indicating that "stealing" is far more than simply taking something from another. Deception in issues of a deposit, actual taking, oppression of another, finding something lost and avoiding returning it, misleading others—all these, and by implication even more, would count as violations of the spirit of the eighth commandment. In other words, the law itself indicates that it should be read expansively, not narrowly.

*IN THE NEW TESTAMENT*, Jesus follows and extends this Old Testament understanding of how one ought to apply God's commands. For instance, he famously engaged a young man on these issues in Matthew 19:

*And behold, a man came up to him, saying, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" And he said to him, "Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you would enter life, keep the commandments." He said to him, "Which ones?" And Jesus said, "You shall not murder, You shall not commit adultery, You shall not steal, You shall not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother, and, You shall love your neighbor as yourself." The young man said to him, "All these I have kept. What do I still lack?" Jesus said to him, "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." When the young man heard this he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions. (Matt 19:16–22)*

The young man got the point, but sadly he chose not to follow Jesus — a sobering end to the conversation. Christ's point, of course, was that the young man's piety was not as exemplary as he would have hoped. True piety did not simply stop with the sins of commission, being able to say, "These I have kept."

Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount is replete with this lesson. Considering the sixth commandment, he states:

*You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire." (Matt 5:21–22)*

Christ makes the same point again, beginning in verse 27, about the seventh commandment:

*“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” (Matt 5:27–30)*

Nor does our Lord limit such thinking to only the ten commandments. In verses 33–37, he approaches the issue of oaths, this time drawing from Leviticus 12:

*Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.’ But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from evil. (Matt 5:33–37)*

*JESUS apparently urges that we take a  
MAXIMAL APPROACH to applying the law in  
our lives, NOT a narrow, limited application.*

Passages such as these are the basis for what is often called the third use of the law, that Christians rightly use the Old Testament law not only to drive us to Jesus (Rom 7:7–11), nor only to restrain evil (Rom 13:1–4), but also to guide us in living the good works God would have us do (Eph 2:10).

*THE WESTMINSTER DIVINES* engaged in this thinking extensively, not in the Confession, but in the catechisms, especially the Westminster Larger Catechism, a document whose depth of thought is often astounding to modern readers if we stop to consider the prayerful reflection behind its exposition of the law. For instance, in answering the question “What are the duties required in the sixth commandment?” the Larger Catechism states:

*The duties required in the sixth commandment are, all careful studies, and lawful endeavours, to preserve the life of ourselves and others by resisting all thoughts and purposes, subduing all passions, and avoiding all occasions, temptations, and practices, which tend to the unjust taking away the life of any; by just defence thereof against violence, patient bearing of the hand of God, quietness of mind, cheerfulness of spirit; a sober use of meat, drink, physical, sleep, labour, and recreations; by charitable thoughts, love, compassion, meekness, gentleness, kindness; peaceable, mild and courteous speeches and behaviour; forbearance, readiness to be reconciled, patient bearing and forgiving of injuries, and requiting good for evil; comforting and succouring the distressed, and protecting and defending the innocent. (WLC 135)*

Further, answering the next question, “What are the sins forbidden in the sixth commandment?” the Larger Catechism continues:

*The sins forbidden in the sixth commandment are, all taking away the life of ourselves, or of others, except in case of public justice, lawful war, or necessary defence; the neglecting or withdrawing the lawful and necessary means of preservation of life; sinful anger, hatred, envy, desire of revenge; all excessive passions, distracting cares; immoderate use of meat, drink, labour, and recreations; provoking words, oppression, quarrelling, striking, wounding, and whatsoever else tends to the destruction of the life of any. (WLC 136)*

When I read examples like questions 103–148 of the Larger Catechism in class, students often react with nervous laughter, both at how much the Westminster Divines got out of each commandment and at how relevant – often in surprising ways – their answers are to major



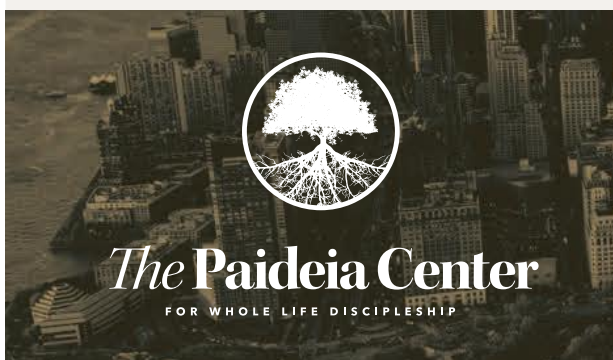
cultural and societal issues today. Yet, what the catechisms do is precisely right. They simply follow what the Scripture has modeled for us regarding ethical thinking – working to maximally apply God’s commandments and his law into every area of our lives. The Divines did so in their world, just as we ought in ours.

We have tremendous resources in our confessional documents to search out how our faith applies to modern issues, not just personal but also social. The Westminster Divines provide us a powerful training, one that forbids us from adopting a merely privatized faith, ignoring the issues of our day. To do so comprehensively – on all of God’s law, not just one piece – provides another powerful training,

one that requires us to address the issues of our day in a biblical fashion, not simply running to society’s solutions. The Divines’ call on us would be to emulate the same patterns of thought, searching every area – personal, societal, everywhere in between – so that we might grow in godliness. ♥



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