

Abstract: Occupy Wall Street and the movement it spawned (#OWS) proclaims that our social life together in the United States has been tragically undermined by the concentration of wealth and political influence in the hands of a few, thereby disenfranchising the many. The author undertakes to explicate distinct emphases of the Reformed tradition—such as ethics, covenant, and the prophetic tradition in scripture—to show how these distinct principles ought predispose a Reformed Christian to take #OWS seriously as a way in which God is calling the church back to faithful and active love of God and neighbor.

About the author: W. Travis McMaken is an Assistant Professor of Religion at Lindenwood University and a member of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). He resides in St. Charles, Missouri, with his wife and two sons, and blogs at *Der Evangelische Theologe* (<http://derevth.blogspot.com>).

Why I Support #OWS as a Reformed Theologian

Recent months have witnessed a remarkable explosion of protest in the name of social and, specifically, economic justice. The Occupy Movement has raced to the forefront of our national consciousness by staking out two fundamentally democratic principles: (1) public space is for the public, and (2) free speech includes the freedom to criticize the prevailing social order. This movement began rather modestly in Manhattan with the Occupy Wall Street chapter, but quickly spread across the nation, fueled by increased media coverage and by misguided and unnecessary police violence. Because the movement began there, and because it is symbolically significant for the movement's message, I will refer to the whole movement as "Occupy Wall Street" by means of its Twitter hashtag, #OWS.

What is #OWS's message? The chattering class¹ has worn out many keyboards in the attempt to understand this phenomenon. Although understanding has increased, it remains common to find folks committed to the notion that #OWS has no message. That is false. #OWS's message is remarkably simple: "capitalism is broken, and it has broken our politics as well." The fuel that launched #OWS is the deeply held conviction, backed up by innumerable studies and statistical data points, that wealth distribution within the United States is increasingly unjust, and that this concentration of wealth in the hands of the few (in #OWS nomenclature, "the 1%") has produced a breakdown in the political process, marginalizing the political voice and will of the many (in #OWS nomenclature, "the 99%"). In all this, #OWS's motivation and message seems to echo that of Abraham Lincoln in his address at Gettysburg, when he called the nation to join him in his resolve "that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

At the end of the day, #OWS constitutes a revolt against what any truly democratic system of government ought to reject, namely, the concentration of vast economic resources in the hands of the few and the consequential concentration of political influence in those same hands. #OWS is

the conscience of our democracy, which has increasingly lapsed into an oligarchy of undemocratic privilege.

Reformed Theology and #OWS

Although there is much within the Christian tradition that would incline one toward support of #OWS, there are certain distinctives within the Reformed theological tradition that provide an extra push in this direction.

Ethics

Perhaps most pertinent is the tradition's ethical emphasis. As John Leith once noted, the Reformed tradition insists "that the Christian is not only a forgiven person but an *ethical* person. This emphasis is reflected in the theology, worship, and polity" of Reformed churches.² Reformed Christianity's ethical focus finds its clearest theological expression in what John Calvin called "the third and principle use" of the Law (specifically, the Ten Commandments or Decalogue).³ Rather than serving simply to restrain evil or to drive non-Christians to despair and thus conversion, Reformed Christianity teaches that the Law also provides believers with instructions describing the sort of life that God wants God's children to live.

This Reformed principle points to the close relationship between what theologians call the "two tables" of the Law, that is, the Decalogue's early commandments concerning life with God and its latter commandments concerning life in community. Jesus built on this twofold aspect when he identified the two greatest commandments: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength . . . You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Mk 12.30-1).⁴ This passage highlights the inextricable link between the two tables of the Law, between love of God and neighbor. Any activities (worship, prayer, etc.) or dispositions that express or profess love of God are mere resounding gongs when they are divorced from active love of neighbor. In this same vein, Matthew 25.34-40 teaches that active love for one's poor and oppressed⁵ neighbors is paradoxically identical with love of God. For my own part, I am convinced that the Reformed tradition's ethical emphasis implies that a Reformed Christian ought to support a movement that aims to undermine the wealth and political privilege enjoyed by the few that keeps many in our nation poor and oppressed.

Covenant

Built into the tradition's very fabric, this ethical emphasis finds its theological foundation in the deeply Reformed idea of covenant. Indeed, this idea is so significant in the Reformed tradition's theological history that there are branches of that history described as "Covenant theology." At the most basic level, "covenant" describes how God and humanity relate. God stands on the one side, a superior party, and enters into relationship with humanity on the other side, an inferior party. This relationship involves mutual responsibility, and is best encapsulated in God's statement to the Israelites: "I will . . . walk among you and be your God, and you shall be My

people” (Lv 26.12). The covenant depends and is built on God’s saving activity, which gives God the right to demand obedience—and ethical action—from those whom God has saved.

This covenantal relationship extends to all humanity. Although much of the Reformed tradition has either explicitly or implicitly limited covenant membership to those who actively share in the Christian faith, there is also a tendency within the tradition (e.g. Heinrich Bullinger) to understand the covenant as a relationship that God has with all of humanity, not just with believers. John Riggs helpfully explains Bullinger’s position as follows: “God is disposed kindly toward all humankind, wanting their salvation and thus wanting them to take up responsibly their side of the divine-human relationship.”⁶ Reformed theology, therefore, pushes us to recognize that those who actively promote the love of neighbor have begun to assume covenantal responsibility before God, even if they have not yet awakened to faith and explicit love of God. Movements such as #OWS thus point Reformed Christians back to their own covenantal responsibility not only to practice love of God, but also and inescapably to practice love of neighbor.

Scripture

Readers will certainly have noticed my persistent appeal to scripture throughout this discussion. It is one of Reformed theology’s great distinctives that it takes scriptural teaching with the utmost seriousness. Auguste Lecerf, a French Reformed thinker in the early 20th century, described the relation between Reformed Christianity and scripture as follows: “With head bowed in the dust, [the Reformed church] would listen to the Word of God. It speaks when it believes that God has spoken, but remains silent in the presence of the silence of [God’s] Word. Here are its credentials. It has no others.”⁷ This primacy of scripture stands out in the importance of confessions among Reformed Christians. Unlike some other Christian traditions that give the theology embodied in their confessions a binding and almost legal quality, Reformed Christianity has always understood its confessions as provisional and contextually determined statements. Aside from recognizing the vicissitudes of life that necessarily impinge upon any particular confession, the Reformed tradition has given its confessions only relative authority “because [the confessions] are subordinate to the higher authority of Scripture,” as the “Confessional Nature of the Church Report,” which heads the PCUSA’s *Book of Confessions*, explains.⁸

A further distinction comes from the tradition’s impulse to approach all of scripture as normative, including—critically—the Old Testament. While Christianity as a whole rejects the heresy of Marcionism, which argues that the God of the Old Testament is not “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Eph 1:3) and consequently that the Old Testament is not properly Christian scripture, the Reformed tradition stands out historically as taking that rejection to heart. It is easy to find sermons preached on Old Testament texts by Reformed ministers, and fifteen of the twenty-two volumes of Calvin’s biblical commentaries deal with Old

Testament books. Indeed, the above discussion of the place that the covenant—a term far more common in the Old Testament than the New—has in Reformed theology demonstrates this point as well.

One strand of the Old Testament’s message is especially pertinent to the present discussion. I refer to what scholars call the Prophetic Tradition, a recurring voice throughout the Old Testament that called Israel back to faithful covenant relationship with God. This tradition is worth explicating here. Listen to Amos 5.21-23:

*I hate, I despise your festivals,
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.
Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings,
I will not accept them;
and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals
I will not look upon.
Take away from me the noise of your songs;
I will not listen to the melody of your harps.*

We have here a litany of how ancient Israel put into practice their love of God, which revolved around sacrifices offered at the temple in Jerusalem. God prescribed all this as the proper way to put their love of God into practice. Why does God now hate these things? The answer is in verses 11-12:

*because you trample on the poor
and you take from them levies of grain,
you have built houses of hewn stone,
but you shall not live in them;
you have planted pleasant vineyards,
but you shall not drink their wine.
For I know how many are your transgressions,
and how great are your sins –
you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe,
and push aside the needy in the gate.*

God’s message of judgment comes to Israel through Amos because Israel has forgotten, as the prophet Micah puts it, “to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God” (Mi 6.8). From an ethical perspective, Israel has forgotten that the second table of the law flows ineluctably from the first, that the love of neighbor is itself a part of the love of God. What does God recommend through his prophet Amos as the proper response to this unacceptable state of affairs? It certainly is not more burnt offerings! Amos provides an answer in verse 15:

*Hate evil and love good,
and establish justice in the gate.*

God demands that God's people address the social injustice in their midst, that they oppose it, that they hate it. Furthermore, these are not recommendations for an individual's pious attitudes and charitable activities. Justice must be established at the gate, where the elders sat in ancient towns and cities to hear disputes and render judgments. God's message through the Old Testament prophets is that faithful and active covenant relationship with God requires that one support the oppressed and oppose the privileged, not only in one's personal life, but also and critically at the very heart of the structures and institutions that govern society.

Neither is this powerful prophetic witness absent from the New Testament. It seems to have played a key role in Jesus Christ's own thought. Two examples will suffice to make this point.

First, Jesus encounters a rich, young ruler who inquires as to what it takes to enter God's kingdom. Jesus replies by reciting the Law, the Ten Commandments. The ruler replies, "I have kept all these since my youth," only to hear from Jesus that "there is still one thing lacking. Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor . . . then come, follow me." Luke tells us that when the ruler heard this, "he became sad; for he was very rich" (cf. Lk 18.18-23). This incident contains immense implications for understanding the Law. Jesus makes two important points by bringing the ruler's riches to the fore and by requiring that he give those riches away to the poor in response to the ruler's conviction that he had observed all that the Law requires. On the one hand, Jesus intimates here that it is impossible to rightly love God through observing the Law without also loving the neighbor through giving of one's resources. But there is another and even more radical hand. Jesus intimates that it is impossible to rightly love one's neighbor while also accumulating significant wealth.⁹

Second, Jesus appeals to the prophetic tradition as a cornerstone of his self-understanding, of the way in which he understood his God-given vocation. Luke records an incident that occurred at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, following shortly after Luke's description of Jesus' birth, baptism, and period of temptation in the wilderness. Jesus returned from the wilderness to his home region of Galilee and began to teach in the synagogues there. When he arrived at his hometown of Nazareth and entered the synagogue, he read from a scroll containing Isaiah's prophetic teaching:

*"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives*

*and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."*

Jesus then rolled up the scroll and sat down and said, with what I can only imagine was a studied calmness, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (cf. Lk 4.14-21). Thus did Jesus identify himself with the prophetic tradition's concern for social justice, for taking the side of the poor and oppressed and standing with them against the privileged, for calling God's people—and, indeed, the whole world—to faithful and active covenant relationship with God.

#OWS and the Church Today

In our nation today, it is #OWS that calls our society back to a concern for social justice, for taking the side of the poor and oppressed and standing with them against the privileged, and who remind the church of its responsibility for faithful and active covenant relationship with God. Karl Barth, perhaps the greatest Reformed theologian since John Calvin, once wrote that "God may speak to [the church] through Russian Communism, a flute concerto, a blossoming shrub, or a dead dog. We do well to listen to [God] if [God] really does."¹⁰ Whether you prefer to think of #OWS as Russian Communism, a flute concerto, a blossoming shrub, or a dead dog, I believe that the Reformed tradition shoves us rudely toward the affirmation that #OWS is where God is speaking to the church in this time and place. This certainly does not mean that the church must now proclaim the gospel of #OWS. Indeed, that would be a very serious mistake. But #OWS reminds the church of something that it has forgotten, namely, that faithful and active shouldering of covenantal responsibility in relationship with God ineluctably involves love of neighbor by taking the side of the poor and oppressed and working in our society for justice.

One of Barth's most significant students, Helmut Gollwitzer, helpfully casts all this in terms that fit well within the contemporary #OWS discussions of social and economic injustice when he writes:

The conversion to which the Christian community is called daily through God's word also includes turning away from its bond in the dominant system of privileges and active engagement for more just social structures no longer determined by social privileges. Therefore the important primary question today is the question about the relation of Christian existence and capitalism. . . . Can one as a Christian affirm and defend the present social system together with its underlying economic order or must this system be intolerable for a Christian?¹¹

It is precisely this question that #OWS puts to the church in the United States today. There is no room for neutrality on this point. As a truism often associated with Edmund Burke says, "All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing." The truth buried here is that

when it comes to issues like those #OWS brings to our attention, remaining neutral offers de facto support to the status quo. As a theologian and Christian in the Reformed tradition, I cannot remain neutral.¹²

¹ Here is one way that Wikipedia describes the term: “the term is used by people all across the political spectrum to refer to the journalists and political operatives who see themselves as the arbiters of conventional wisdom.”

² John H. Leith, *An Introduction to the Reformed Tradition: A Way of Being the Christian Community*, revised edition (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1981), 80. Emphasis added.

³ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols., Library of Christian Classics (Ford Lewis Battles; trans., John T. McNeill, ed.; Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1960), 2.7.12; 360.

⁴ All scriptural quotations are taken from the NRSV.

⁵ Or the marginalized, abused, tortured, etc. It is a testament to this world’s great evil that we require so many terms to adequately describe those ground beneath violent wheels of power.

⁶ John W. Riggs, *Baptism in the Reformed Tradition: An Historical and Practical Theology*, Columbia Series in Reformed Theology (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 38.

⁷ Auguste Lecerf, *An Introduction to Reformed Dogmatics* (André Schlemmer, trans.; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1981), 385.

⁸ PC(USA), *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.): Part 1, Book of Confessions* (Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly, 1999), xix.

⁹ The ruler believes that he has observed the second table of the Law (which concerns love of neighbor and forbids stealing, bearing false witness, etc.) just as fully as the first table (which concerns rejecting idolatry, the worship of other gods, etc.). Indeed, Jesus only explicitly mentions, and the ruler only explicitly affirms observing, commandments from the second table. That Jesus points to the ruler’s wealth in response to the affirmation that he observed love of neighbor suggests that precisely that wealth stands as a witness against the ruler, implicating him in failing to observe the Law’s second table. Perhaps the ruler went away sad not primarily because he realized that he could not join Jesus unless he gave away his wealth, but because he realized even more fundamentally that he had not in fact “kept all these [commandments] since my youth” (v 21).

¹⁰ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 4 volumes in 13 part-volumes (Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Thomas F. Torrance, trans. & ed.; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956-75), 1.1, 55. For a technical theological discussion of how this works, cf. George Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth: The Shape of His Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 234-80.

¹¹ Helmut Gollwitzer, “Why I Am A Christian Socialist.” <<http://portland.indymedia.org/en/2003/04/62441.shtml>>. December 2011.

¹² One ought interpret this discussion as a call for concrete actualization of the theological and ecclesial values promoted by the *Accra Confession*, promulgated by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (now merged with the Reformed Ecumenical Council to form the World Communion of Reformed Churches), in the contemporary social climate of the United States. This confession urges Reformed Christians throughout the world to “reject current world economic order imposed by global neoliberal capitalism and any other economic system...which defy God’s covenant by excluding the poor, the vulnerable and the whole of creation from the fullness of life” (§19). The confession’s full text is available for download on the Presbyterian Church (USA)’s website, <<http://www.pcusa.org/resource/accra-confession-covenant-justice-economy-and-eart/>>. December 2011.