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The Theological Legacy of William Capers' 'Slave' Catechisms

Dr Adam Ployd

William Capers was born in South Carolina in 1790. The descendant of early American Methodists, he himself was 'converted', as it were, in 1808 and soon became a leader in the missionary work of the Methodist Episcopal Church. When the MEC split in 1844 over the issue of slavery into Northern and Southern factions, Capers was soon elected a bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. Throughout his ministry, Capers was concerned to evangelize to enslaved persons of African descent throughout the South and particularly in South Carolina. The catechisms that he wrote for the instruction of both children and adults remain important evidence for the ways in which many American descendants of Wesley related to the demonic institution of slavery.

In this brief paper, I will examine the contents of Capers' catechisms, highlighting three recurring and intertwining themes within them. These themes are sin and judgment; moral duties; and the imminence of death. The three combine to create a spiritual context in which one's faith is oriented toward pleasing God by obeying one's master for the sake of a reward in the next life that will overshadow all the sufferings of this one. It is a catechetical process designed to humble and subdue the enslaved, putting them squarely in their social place—obediently at the bottom.

At the end of this paper, I will offer a few thoughts on what these texts invite us to remember about this legacy and how we might best live with that memory in our own ministries.

One of the difficulties about reading 'slave' catechisms is that they sometimes appear rather innocuous. Of course, the context is bad, but isn't it good that someone is still concerned with saving souls and bringing people to Christ? After all, much of the content of the catechisms concerns the goodness and love of God, the sacrifice of Christ, and how we can be saved through the grace of the Holy Spirit. But the context is not merely incidental. It shapes and, indeed, is shaped by the content. Content that might seem harmless or simply traditional becomes insidious, even demonic, in its contextual deployment.

I begin, therefore, not with the catechisms themselves, but with a statement from the South Carolina Annual Conference in 1836, 3 years after Capers published his first of many catechisms. In a report on the matter of slavery, the conference missionary society offers the following statement, which I quote at length:

We regard the question of the abolition of slavery as a civil one, belonging to the State, and not at all a religious one, or appropriate to the Church... We denounce the principles and opinions of the abolitionists in toto... We believe that the Holy Scriptures, so far from giving any countenance to this delusion, do unequivocally authorize the relation of master and slave: 1. By holding masters and their slaves alike, as believers, brethren beloved. 2. By enjoining on each the duties proper to the other. 3. By grounding their obligations for the fulfilment of these duties, as of all other, on their relation to God. Masters could never have had their duties enforced by the consideration, 'your master who is in heaven,' if barely being a master involved in itself any thing immoral. Our missionaries inculcate the duties of servants to their masters, as we find those duties stated in Scriptures. They inculcate the performance of them as indispensably important. We hold that a Christian slave must be submissive, faithful, and obedient, for reasons of the same authority with those which oblige husbands, wives, fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, to fulfil the duties of these relations.

There is a lot to unpack here. First, the conference is clear that the church should not get tangled up in the question of slavery. That is a civil matter, not a religious one. It then quickly gets tangled up in the question of slavery. But it does so under the guise of this distinction between the religious and the civic. The latter, it would seem, is about law. Should slavery be legally upheld or abolished? Well we couldn't possibly say! That's not our place! But from the religious angle, that is, from the perspective not only of personal salvation and holiness but indeed for the ordering of social relations, slavery is not only licit but good. After all, is not God called 'master?' The responsibility of religion, then, is to make the most of this god-blessed institution by ensuring that it is morally carried out. And while lip service is given to the duties of the master, most of the content is concerned with the duties of the enslaved. The role, then, of Methodist missionaries to the enslaved, according to this annual conference, should be to inculcate a moral piety of obedience and subservience that supports the biblical institution.

Added to this statement should be the fact that one version of Capers' catechism was published in 1853 by the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South itself, that is to say, it had the official endorsement of the denomination's highest authority

This is the context within which we need to read the following excerpts from several editions of Capers' catechisms.

That 1853 version I just mentioned begins with a chapter on God. Included in this section are the following questions and responses:

Does he always see us, and take notice of us?

Yes; nothing can hide us from God.

Does he care for us?

O yes; God is our Father in heaven.

Nothing can hide us from God. And God is our Father in heaven. God sees us and God cares for us. Given the connection between God as the master in heaven and the slave-owner as the master on earth, we can sense some very uncomfortable parallels. Nothing can hide us from the master. But don't forget, the master cares for you. The enslaved are thus taught both to fear and to love their owners under the auspices of fearing and loving God. What better basis for ensuring the 'right' conditions for a docile plantation.

In a section on the creation of humanity, Capers offers these questions and answer:

What did God make man out of?

The dust of the ground.

What does this teach you?

To be humble.

What else does it teach you?

To remember I must die, and my body turn to dust again.

To be humble and to remember that I must die. What teaching could be better for promoting obsequious acquiescence among the enslaved. Your faith is about humility and looking beyond this life for your true reward. If you suffer in this life, accept it humbly and know that your suffering is just part of what it means to be human.

The catechism then moves to the first humans and the first sin. Capers is particularly concerned to impress upon his catechumens the consequence of this sin:

What happened to them then?

They were good no more, and God was angry with them.

And what did God do to them?

He turned them out of paradise.

What more did he do to them?

He sentenced them to labor and sorrow, pain and death.

Did they have any children before they sinned and lost that good nature that God made them in?

No; they sinned first, and their children were born in sin.

And are all men born sinners still?

None are born good; no, not one.

Again, nothing here is shocking in the abstract. Whether we agree with the doctrine or not, no one can argue that it is not a typical representation of several strong streams within the Christian tradition. But in the context of slavery, these doctrines ring differently. The fate of Adam and Eve is labour and sorrow, pain and death. It is, Capers might be saying to the enslaved, your fate. Your experience of forced labour is nothing more than the consistent consequence of original sin. And if that weren't enough, don't forget that it isn't just Adam's sin that condemns you; it is yours too, because you are children born in sin. You deserve, therefore, the same life of labour and sorrow, pain and death, that our first parents brought upon themselves.

But all is not lost. There is salvation, for the righteous. A few more questions and answers:

What will become of mankind then?

The righteous shall be taken up into heaven, but the wicked shall be turned into hell.

How must we live so as not to fall from God's grace?

We must deny ourselves, and take up our cross daily, and follow Jesus.

What is a servant's duty to his master and mistress?

To serve them with a good will heartily, and not with eye-service.

What is your duty to your enemies?

To love them, and pray for them.

What is your duty to them that do you any wrong?

To forgive them, as I pray God to forgive me.

We have here a matrix of righteous suffering. The enslaved are promised a paradise of respite from earthly suffering, but only if they deny themselves and take up their crosses. And this includes not simply serving the masters but doing so genuinely and with a cheerful heart. And should their master wrong them? Forgive and pray. What this means is that to challenge the current conditions of enslavement would be to risk one's own eternal damnation.

What are we to make of all this? What are we to take away from these horrifying efforts to inoculate enslaved persons against the atrocities of their condition? Several things are worth noting. First, we should remember that the enslaved persons to which these catechisms were taught were not merely passive recipients. They were active agents in their own right. This is exactly what these catechisms forget! I don't mean that the enslaved bear responsibility for their own suffering. What I mean is that we cannot ignore the fact that the enslaved persons of African descent in the American South received this faith not with mere deference but with constructive creativity, finding within the tradition those visions of justice and liberation that their masters would keep hidden. Songs and rituals developed into powerful ecclesial traditions that continue to revolutionize the face of Christianity around the world, leading the vanguard in calls for biblically-based freedom and abundant life for all. In our own memory, then, let us not fetishize the oppressed as mere objects of abuse. We must remember the complex legacy that emerges from the crucible of American slavery.

Second, and this may be the more difficult lesson, we must, I think, remember that William Capers likely thought he was doing the right thing, the faithful thing, the Christian thing, in promoting this sort of faith among the enslaved. We can and should look back and roundly, strongly, vehemently condemn him as not only wrong but horrifically so. And yet, it is sobering to consider how we, too, might be viewed by future memory in light of our own legacies. I hope and pray that I am right in thinking that I am not guilty of enabling anything as horrible as slavery. And I don't want to draw any false equivalencies to whatever I or we are guilty of. But I have no illusion that I am innocent in my attempts to live faithfully in the world I have inherited. Most significantly, arising from the catechisms we have just engaged, where might we, where might I, be ignorant of the contextual implications of our best theology? Contextual theologians have been raising this alarm for years. And yet are all of us, myself included, equally willing to listen. Do some of us feel more threatened than others at the call to, for example, erase sexist, racist, homophobic, or ableist language from our preaching and liturgies? Twenty years ago I would have thought nothing of referring to 'those with ears to hear and eyes to see' or to the 'light overcoming the darkness.' Now, I have been called in to consider the unintended implications of such language.

I'm not here to make a specific statement about specific language. I aim, rather, to identify one legacy of slave catechisms that should shape our intentional memory: in contexts of oppression and marginalization, the theological discourse of the powerful often brings death even where it is meant to bring life. May this uncomfortable memory of the past form our present and future ministries to be more attentive to the ways we might be complicit—consciously or not—in the dehumanizing of God's people.

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