

Seeking Social Justice

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Introduction to *Being Reformed: Faith Seeking Understanding*

Reformed and Presbyterian Christians are people of faith who are seeking understanding. From the beginnings of our Reformed tradition, Presbyterians have realized God calls us to explore ways the Christian faith can be more fully known and expressed. This vision has driven concerns for the education of people of all ages. Presbyterians have been big on providing resources to help us delve more deeply into Christian faith and the theology that gives our living tradition its distinctive heritage.

This *Being Reformed* curriculum for adults is one expression of the desire to open up what it means to be Presbyterian Christians in the world today. Our purpose is to enhance, enrich, and expand our insights. We want Presbyterians to grow in understandings of elements that are foundational and significant for their faith. Encounters with theology, church, worship, spirituality/discipleship, and social righteousness will guide our ways.

These studies engage our whole selves. We will find our minds moved by new ideas, our emotions stirred with responses of gratitude, and calls for action that can lead us in different life directions. Heads, hearts, and hands will be drawn into the joys of discovering what new things God is calling us toward.

We invite you to join this journey of faith seeking understanding. Celebrate the blessings of our Reformed and Presbyterian tradition of faith. Be stimulated and challenged by fresh insights that will deepen your understandings. Find a stronger commitment to the God who has loved us in Jesus Christ.

To the Leader

The authors of *Being Reformed: Faith Seeking Understanding* emphasize essential Reformed theological principles that relate to our lives of faith. These sessions will help you lead a group into the theology and thoughts inspired by the challenging and interesting articles in the participant's book.

You might choose simply to begin the session with the prayer that precedes each session in the participant's book, then reading through the articles together, stopping when you or a student wishes to comment or raise a question. You could then close the session by discussing the questions at the end of the session and encouraging the group members to do the spiritual practice.

Unfortunately, that style of leading does not meet the needs of every kind of learner. The session plans encourage group leaders to try some new things to light up the hearts and minds of more people. Most teachers teach the way they like to learn. Choosing one new activity during each session will stretch you and open a door to someone who learns differently than you. Over the weeks, you will notice what your group enjoys and what they are unwilling to do. Let that, rather than your preferences, be your guide as you prepare to lead.

These session plans are designed to encourage group participation. Discussion and sharing create community and provide practice that all of us need in expressing our faith and wrestling with our questions. When asking questions, get comfortable with some silence while group members contemplate a response. Resist the urge to fill up the silence with your words.

If your group members like to talk, you might not be able to ask every suggested question. Also it will make a difference in your group session if group members have read the articles prior to the session. If you find it necessary to read from the participant's book during the group session, choose the passages that convey the core ideas.

You are more than a dispenser of information. In your role as group leader, you cooperate with God in the formation of faith and in the transformation of lives. You are the lead learner, modeling a way that faith seeks understanding. You are not trying to cover a lesson, but to uncover truth. Pray for yourself and your group members, prepare your session, relax, and enjoy!

May God bless your faithfulness!

A Christian Challenge to Current Social and Economic Problems

Scripture

Isaiah 65:20

Main Idea

In this session, we will explore how the social creeds of the last century—and the very real economic, political, and social concerns that generated them—are linked theologically with the writings of the prophets and the demands of the gospel.

Teaching Points

This session invites learners to consider:

1. The Social Creed for the 21st Century, its content, focus, and background.
2. How social creeds have served as a way for Reformed Christians to proclaim social righteousness.
3. The writings of Old Testament prophets and the vision they had for a new earth.

Resources Needed

Bibles

Participant's books

Photos of child laborers from the early twentieth century

Lightweight string or heavy thread (such as crochet thread)

Paper and pen

Optional: Computer with Internet access

Leader Prep

The prophets reminded Israel of their covenant responsibilities before God. God had cared for the people's every need during their post-Exodus wanderings; God also expected them to show the same kind of compassion and justice to others. How do we respond to the call of the prophets today? In this session, you may find many different understandings of how we are called to work for justice. Some may feel that social issues are not the province of the church; others may want to focus all the work of faith in the task of healing societies. It will be important to encourage careful listening and gracious responses.

Carefully read the Social Creed for the 21st Century, which is printed in the participant's book. Compare its calls for change with the economic, political, and social problems described in the section "Cries of Distress" in the participant's book. Also read Isaiah 65 closely and consider the connections between the prophet's challenges and the goals described in the creed.

Go to gamc.pcusa.org/ministries/acswp/social-creed to learn more about the Social Creed for the 21st Century. This link includes access to a booklet about the creed as well as a 28-minute video. You will need to show the video to your group in Session 6. If you would prefer to use a DVD instead of a downloaded version, follow the link to purchase the DVD.

Visit historyplace.com/unitedstates/childlabor to view and download Lewis Hine's photos of child labor in the early twentieth century. These photos, which are permitted for non-commercial home or school use, need to be available to show the participants. Either print copies of the images that can be passed around your group or consider projecting the images onto a screen.

Research an area of the world that currently struggles with the exploitation of child labor and look for information about organizations that are working to end the exploitation. Find ways for your participants to advocate for this issue, including getting the name and contact information of a government official who can help work for a resolution to the problem.

Leading the Session

Gather

- Give participants an opportunity to introduce themselves to each other.
- Pray together the prayer in the participant's book for this session.

Head

- Point out the theological character of the divisions of the creed—faith, love, and hope. These sections lift up the image of God in every individual. Affirm that living in community requires that we seek to strengthen the world's communities, ease the burden on the most vulnerable, and commit ourselves to living as stewards of God's creation, always working for peace and justice.
- Read Isaiah 65:20. God is promising to create a world in which there will never be “an infant who lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime.” The prophet speaks of God's promise of new heavens and a new earth. Ask: *What connections might you discover between the passage in Isaiah and Jesus' announcement that his mission is to announce the coming of God's kingdom?* (See Luke 4:16–20, for example.)

Heart

- The great challenge for many of us is that we are not on the margins of society. We live pretty comfortably. As Dr. Hinson-Hasty has pointed out, statistics can be informative, but don't necessarily show the reality of the conditions they describe. Ask: *What other ways might we come to understand the problems that the 1908 Social Creed and the Social Creed for the 21st Century speak to?*
- One of the main affirmations in the 1908 Social Creed was the abolition of child labor, an affirmation that is also reflected in the modern social creed. Share some of Lewis Hine's photos of child laborers, all taken around the time that the 1908 Social Creed was written. Hine traveled the country to photograph children working in a variety of industries and jobs. He hoped that, seeing the conditions in which these children worked, people would seek to end child labor. Nevertheless, child labor was not effectively regulated until the passage of the Fair Labor Standards Act in 1938.
- Share that industrialization in the late nineteenth century brought many people into the cities from the farms. The demand for labor was intense and children's labor came cheaply. Large families often needed everyone to work—another pressure encouraging children's labor. Ask: *What economic and social pressures are still at work in the world that keep the call for the abolition of the exploitation of children high on the list for the Social Creed for the 21st Century?*

- Share the following: Children worked in agriculture and in many industries, including mining and manufacturing. In textile mills, many children worked in the spinning room because mill owners felt their small hands were well-suited to the tasks. Work in the spinning room did not require special skills, but did require close attention and watchful eyes. Spinners were usually preteen or teen girls, who had to attend constantly to the cotton spinning on machines, watching for breaks in the thread as it fed into the spinning machines. They had to quickly “put up ends” or twist the ends together and feed the cotton back into the machine.
- Give participants a length of string or heavy thread. Ask them to tie knots in it as quickly as they are able. Imagine doing this all day. Imagine doing this all day for twelve hours a day, for six days a week. Imagine doing this all day, all week for about one dollar a day in wages. Share reactions to the idea of such labor.

Hands

- Consider these questions posed by Dr. Hinson-Hasty: “What are some of the Gospel stories that highlight Jesus’ sympathies with the poor and oppressed? What challenges do you personally face when you consider ways that you can work for peace and justice?”
- Share your findings about a current area of the world where the exploitation of child labor is a problem. If you have Internet access, explore some Web sites together that address this issue. As a group, write a letter to a government official that calls for this exploitation to end. Give each participant an opportunity to sign the letter before mailing it to its intended audience.
- If members of the class engaged in the suggested spiritual practice over the week, ask if any would like to share any of their discoveries. Join together as a group and repeat the practice by making two lists—one of examples of clear need and distress, and the other of hopeful signs of Isaiah’s new earth.

Depart

- Invite each participant to share how this session has affected his or her faith.
- Close with prayer.

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A Christian Challenge to Current Social and Economic Problems

Scripture

Isaiah 65:17a, 19b–23 God's vision of a new heaven and a new earth where no child will be born for calamity and no one will labor in vain.

Prayer

Great Wisdom, heighten our awareness of attitudes and practices that deceive us into thinking we are so different from others. Focus our attention on our common nature and needs. Clear our eyes to see the value in all forms of work: from manager to worker, server to cook, doctor to janitor, mother or father at home to mother or father as breadwinner. Stir within us a longing for a world where weeping will no longer be heard and the basic needs of all will be satisfied. May we find the voice to proclaim with the prophets your vision for a new earth. Amen.

Introduction

Do we Christians really know how to respond to the call of the prophets in our own time? Isaiah's words are clear in their ancient context. As Israel grew in prosperity, the prophets reminded people of faith of their covenant with God so they would not forget the God who provided for their greatest needs and acted to free them from the bondage of the empires that had held them captive. Is the message of prophets like Isaiah also relevant today? Are there places where people continue to be held in bondage by others? Would our world look different if we were to think of the prophets' imagination and vision for justice as directly related to our own social, economic, and political lives?

If we look at the Social Creed for the 21st Century as a way to honor the church's important prophetic tradition, we can only offer a resounding *yes* to these questions. The creed makes us aware of many places where people are held in bondage today. It points toward practices and policies that bear the potential to bring God's vision for a new earth into conversations about social and economic justice.

The Social Creed for the 21st Century celebrates the centennial of the 1908 Social Creed and was adopted by both the PC(USA) and the National Council of Churches in 2008. A creed is one of the ways Reformed and Presbyterian Christians promote social righteousness as one of the Great Ends of the Church. Like the 1908 creed, this creed calls for Christians to work collaboratively and ecumenically in response to the great challenges of globalization and sustainability.

To begin, carefully read the twenty-first-century creed. Take a moment to reflect on the relevance of Isaiah's words for the social and economic problems we face in our own time. The first session invites you to begin exploring, just grazing the surface of the social, economic, and political problems named in the creed. We will consider the theological basis the creed provides for a contemporary Christian response to problems we face today.

Cries of Distress: Living in States of Economic and Social Vulnerability in the United States

The Social Creed for the 21st Century begins by focusing on economic, social, and political problems of the United States before moving to the larger global community. Nearly all Christians in the United States have become more aware of their own economic vulnerabilities because of the economic downturn at the beginning of the century. Not all, however, have had the experience of living in a perpetual state of social and economic vulnerability and witnessing the instability created for individuals or within families, due to being paid extremely low wages or working in jobs that do not offer adequate pension and health-care plans.

Consider these facts:

- Of all the industrialized countries, the United States has the highest overall poverty rate and the highest child poverty rate. The National Center for Children in Poverty reports that about 14 million children in the United States are living in poverty. In addition, poverty disproportionately affects black and Latino families: 34 percent of black children and 29 percent of Latino children live in poverty, whereas 13 percent of Asian children and 10 percent of white children do.
- About one-fourth of the workforce (about 30 million people) works in low-wage jobs. The percentage of low-wage earners among African American and Hispanic people is far higher than their overall representation in the workforce.

- Despite some advances, women in the United States have yet to achieve full equality. Women continue to bear a greater burden of poverty and earn seventy-six cents on the dollar when compared with men in similar occupations. Women are underrepresented in the political realm; about 14 percent of U.S. senators are women.
- Some strides have recently been made with regard to health care. However, the United States ranks forty-second in life expectancy when compared with other nations in the international community.
- The United States may have laws favoring an eight-hour work day, but employees in our nation work the most of any in all the industrialized nations.
- A Pew Report from 2008 stated that one in one hundred adults in the United States was in prison. Minority groups had particularly high incarceration rates. State governments were spending \$50 billion a year on corrections, and the federal government was spending about \$5 billion.

These statistics challenge us to investigate the root causes of the social and economic disparities that are so evident in our society. The Social Creed for the 21st Century underscores the experiences of those who are underpaid or underemployed, who lack adequate health care and access to needed resources on all levels of society.

The creed calls for “full civil, political and economic rights for women and men of all races[;] abolition of forced labor, human trafficking, and the exploitation of children[;] employment for all, at a family-sustaining living wage . . . and rights of workers to organize.” These set an important vision before us.

The Social Creed for the 21st Century underscores the experiences of those who are underpaid or underemployed, who lack adequate health care and access to needed resources on all levels of society.

Connecting Jesus and the Prophets

For some Christians, statistical data alone will not provide a strong enough basis to argue that our existing social, economic, and political systems need fixing. Some will say statistical data can be interpreted in many different ways. They will say we could also consider the circumstances in which we are living in light of the

progress we have made—view the glass as half full, rather than half empty. Perspective, however, determines much. Our concerns about the disparities and inequalities highlighted above are not just social; Christian thought and practice offer a strong theological basis for our social concern.

You may have noticed that the Social Creed for the 21st Century has an explicitly theological framework. Isaiah’s vision for the peaceable kingdom is connected to a call found in Gospel texts that disciples of Jesus Christ stand in solidarity with those pushed to the margins of society so all “may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). Jesus’ own ministry is clearly seen here to be in line with the prophets.

Walter Rauschenbusch, a social gospel theologian, is remembered for making the connection between Jesus and the prophets. More will be said in the next session about the connection between the twenty-first-century creed and the 1908 creed. But it is important to observe that our contemporary creed is intended to emphasize the continued relevance of the social gospel. The social gospel movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries established a broad and ecumenical coalition of committed Protestants who collaborated to address the circumstances of the working poor. Rauschenbusch wrote two key books that helped articulate a theological framework for the movement: *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (1907) and *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (1917). Contemporary theologians and church leaders today pay attention to Rauschenbusch’s writings and the way he connected his faith to social concern along with his understanding of Jesus’ own prophetic ministry.

Rauschenbusch focused on the personality and character of Jesus and emphasized the way Jesus himself had learned from the prophets. The prophets challenged the individualism of both religion and society. Rauschenbusch believed Jesus had an interest in national and social life and acted in ways that showed the connection between faith and justice. Think about stories of Jesus sitting at table with tax collectors, sinners, and women and breaking boundaries defined by race, class, and ethnicity. Jesus was able to do what others had not done; he became fully conscious of the unity of all humanity and lived with compassion for others. Jesus spoke to his own age about concrete conditions and responded to the stirrings of the life that

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surged about him. Rauschenbusch identified Jesus' sympathies with the poor and oppressed. Jesus had a revolutionary consciousness that eliminated distinctions of social rank and economic status and introduced a kingdom of equality on earth. Jesus became a religious initiator of social reform whose central mission was to announce the coming of God's kingdom or, to use the language found in Isaiah, a "new earth" (Isaiah 65:17).

A Challenge for All Jesus' Followers

We may be wondering how the social gospel fits with Reformed thought and practice. The connection Rauschenbusch made between Jesus and the prophets can be clearly found in Reformed thought.

In Reformed thought, God above all else is worthy of our devotion; therefore, we must be conscious of and confront ways in which our practices run counter to God's vision for the world. Jesus' life was a life lived-for-others. Jesus' life lived-for-others

In Reformed thought, God above all else is worthy of our devotion; therefore, we must be conscious of and confront ways in which our practices run counter to God's vision for the world.

was a sign of his own integrity, authenticity, and response to the God of Israel. The challenge Rauschenbusch presented through his understanding of Jesus is a challenge for all Jesus' followers. Responding with integrity and authenticity, however, is not an easy task. Our responses require understanding the needs of others around us, entering into the experience of others, and looking beyond our own limited visions for the world.

There are many examples of people who have taken up this challenge. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Presbyterian Donaldina Cameron chose to live for others as she rescued Chinese immigrant women who had been sold into sex slavery. Laws at the time prevented Chinese men from marrying women outside their own ethnic group. Many of the men had come to California to work on the railroad and settle the West. The laws and growing number of Chinese immigrants created a large market for Chinese women. Cameron is legendary among Presbyterians in California. She not only accompanied police officers on their raids of brothels in San Francisco, she also created Cameron House, which helped assimilate women after they were rescued from the sex-slave trade. Cameron advocated for the women through her rescue work,

by creating educational and training programs specifically focused on the needs of women who were rescued from the sex-slave trade, and by going with them to the U.S. court system to secure their futures as U.S. citizens. Cameron House still exists today, addressing the needs of the Chinese-American community in San Francisco. Many of the women began to call her *Lo Mo*, which in Chinese means “old mother.” Cameron’s life was lived-for-others as she challenged the attitudes toward immigrants that dominated her society.

The Social Creed for the 21st Century is intended to begin a conversation about finding a sense of moral coherence in difficult times and to consider how we can live with authenticity and integrity as we pursue the common good. We will grapple with much more in the five sessions that follow.

Spiritual Practice

Enter into prayer for examining your conscience and consciousness. Reflect on events of the last forty-eight hours. On a sheet of paper, list places where you have seen people in distress and separately list times when you have seen glimpses of a new earth.

Questions for Reflection

What are some of the destructive patterns and behaviors named by the Social Creed for the 21st Century? Where do you see evidence that these destructive patterns and behaviors are threatening the health of your community? Where do you see churches addressing these destructive patterns?

Walter Rauschenbusch connected Jesus with the prophets. What are some of the Gospel stories that highlight Jesus’ sympathies with the poor and oppressed?

What challenges do you personally face when you consider ways that you can work for peace and justice?