Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism
Lord’s Day 42 (1895)*

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Q. 110: What does God forbid in the eighth commandment?
A: God forbids not only outright theft and robbery but also such wicked schemes and devices as false weights and measures, deceptive merchandising, counterfeit money, and usury; we must not defraud our neighbor in any way, whether by force or by show of right. In addition, God forbids all greed and all abuse or squandering of his gifts.

Q. 111: What does God require of you in this commandment?
A. I must promote my neighbor’s good wherever I can and may, deal with him as I would like others to deal with me, and work faithfully so that I may be able to give to those in need.

You shall not steal.
—Exodus 20:15

From the seventh commandment, we move on to the eighth and with that from body to belongings. As we noted in our treatment of the division of the Law, you can offend your neighbor in his person, world, and name. When you break the sixth commandment, you offend your neighbor in his person, the ninth commandment in his name, and the seventh and eighth commandments in his world. Our soul is related in two ways to the sensible, visible world: first, in a very close sense through our body; and second, in a wider sense through the clothes that cover our body, the food that sustains our body, the dwelling in which our body finds protection against the cold—in short, through all the earthly goods that in some sense enter into a relationship with us. For that reason it is hardly unexpected that the issue of offending one’s neighbor in his world is not addressed in one commandment but is divided over two commandments. For while our body does belong to our being, our belongings do not. All the same, our being is designed to enjoy the good things this world has to offer, and so we have the promise of eternal bliss in which we will not only have a glorified body but also a glorified world—a most beautiful paradise—a Jerusalem filled with glory. Yet that great distinction between our body and belongings still remains; our body is part of us, our belongings are with us. Thus, the seventh and eighth commandments together form one commandment if we take body and belongings together under the one concept of the visible, in distinction from our person and name. They separate and divide the very minute we pay attention to the profound difference that exists between what belongs to us and what is part of us. Of course, in the
commandments that concern not our neighbor but God, this distinction falls away entirely because God is a spirit and has no body. For that reason we can indeed offend God in his person (i.e., as God), in his world, and in his name, but because the entire world belongs to God there is no division into different commandments as is the case with the commandments relating to offenses against one’s neighbor in his world. The parallel as we had set it up at the outset of our discussion therefore remains.

You shall not offend (1) God or (2) your neighbor:

- in his person: first commandment, sixth commandment
- in his world: second commandment, seventh and eighth commandments
- in his name: third commandment, ninth commandment

The special import of the fourth and fifth commandments we have already treated in our commentary and for that reason does not need to be discussed further. We only bring the above to our readers’ attention again so that they may be reminded of the context in which these commandments must be placed as they pass from the seventh to the eighth and to understand from what perspective the eighth commandment ought to be approached.

This immediately makes it clear that it is most incorrect the way many people have appealed to the eighth commandment in order to defend today’s distribution of wealth as well as the notion of ownership rights as they are currently exercised. Beginning in 1840, when Proudhon with his Qu’est-ce que la propriété? suggested that all ownership is in fact grounded in theft, people have consistently (and most correctly) pointed to the eighth commandment as a fixed point for the conscience. Without such a fixed point, people can twist things in such a way that in the end everything is reduced to the same thing and every distinction between truth and falsehood, between justice and injustice, and so also between ownership and theft falls away. Insofar as the eighth commandment is appealed to in order to make this point, we agree with it; a fixed point has indeed been given to us in it for the question of ownership. In that sense, the eighth commandment is one of the foundations for the very structure of society. Those who believe in the Word of God should never allow themselves to contribute to a society that pushes that commandment aside. However, if rich owners push their appeal to it further and show their concern to be more for their own treasure than with the “earth’s foundations,” and so try to deduce from the eighth commandment that all they have is their lawful property and that God has given them the freedom to do with it as they please, Christian ethics has the duty and call to break down all
such false notions. A simple reading of the Heidelberg Catechism’s explanation of the eighth commandment would have sufficed for this purpose, for when it says that it is transgressed by (1) all who have in their possession something that was obtained by a scheme, by deception, by usury, and so forth; (2) all who are greedy or who squander what they have; and (3) finally, by all who do not use their possessions in order to promote their neighbor’s utmost good and to help the poor, it is immediately clear that the eighth commandment’s transgressors are largely found precisely among the owners, and that their number is greater outside of the prison walls than inside of them. Proudhon’s claim that all ownership comes from theft is certainly untrue. On closer examination, however, it is true that a very large part of the belongings in this world are stolen property—yet it was not Proudhon who discovered this, for as early as 1563 this awareness could already be found in the catechism.

We will not stop at this more or less superficial line of reasoning. The catechism does serve for us as an explanation of the Word, but it is in itself never a rule for our actions. We therefore need to go back to Scripture—not, however, as if God’s words you shall not steal are the deepest foundation on which respect for our neighbor’s right of ownership rests. This can never be the case, for an external commandment always has less force than a commandment written by the Lord himself on the table of our hearts. In fact, had the Lord not written his law on our heart, we would not understand what he meant with the external commandment. An external commandment that does not depend on an internal commandment always remains one that needs full definition where what you may and may not do is described in detail. As an example, we can think of the command given in paradise that concerned a specific tree, and where God told Adam and Eve precisely what they were to do with respect to it. However, a general commandment such as “you shall not steal” that extends to all people in every aspect of their lives would neither be understood nor grasped did an internal commandment matching this eighth commandment not rule in the heart of man.

This, then, is how things went: When God created man, he also created in him an awareness of the distinction between one person and another, and consequently also between the belongings of one and those of another. Sin attempted to destroy this awareness altogether and would indeed have succeeded had God the Lord not checked this destruction by his common grace, and left in us a certain awareness of the respect we must show for another’s possessions. This is why this awareness still functions among the Gentiles even apart from the Sinaitic law, as Paul says in Romans 2:14 that the Gentiles “who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law.” The holy apostle could say this with truth because in his time people lived under Roman law that was developed in great
detail on the specific issue of property. At the same time, it was only with the declaration of the eighth commandment on Mount Sinai that this commandment that sounded brokenly within the heart of man was restored externally and in the form of an external voice now pervaded through to his very conscience. If the eighth commandment is understood in this way—as reestablishing the fading awareness of the distinction between the possessions of one man and those of another—and, once ownership was overturned in theft as was bound to happen, as the foundation on which social order rests, we can also agree fully with the appeal to the eighth commandment as a fixed point, provided that one does not attempt to make it say more than it does and take it out of the context of the other things God’s Word reveals concerning ownership and possession.

Consequently, serious protests should be raised against any form of the supposition that the eighth commandment requires all things on earth to belong personally to some individual, and as if it for that reason excludes communal or common ownership. This is not a consequence that follows from it and is much less stated directly by it. A community where all pastures, fields, and so forth are communal property and where personal property does not exist with the exception of clothing, household goods, and tools does not in any way stand in conflict with the eighth commandment. Therefore, much of the earth’s goods would still remain personal property (i.e., possessions that at one point in time belong to one person and not to another) and because the strong are inclined by sin to take away from others what is actually theirs, the commandment “you shall not steal” would still be fully in force. Consequently, the eighth commandment does not as such have anything to say about the nature of the distribution of earthly goods and makes room for different forms of the distribution of wealth. One would only come into conflict with this commandment if one were to try to organize a society where no one would have anything that he could call his own, and where all property without exception would be communal. When it is said of the first New Testament church in Jerusalem, for example, that they shared everything they had (Acts 4:32), we should not understand by this that they also gave up their clothes, household goods, tools, and the like. Rather, it applies only to their money, land, or rental houses. We insist on this so strongly and clearly because many have now become used to appealing to the eighth commandment in their battle against social democracy as if the society envisioned by the majority of social democrats would inevitably come into conflict with the eighth commandment. This is simply not the case. Most academically inclined social democrats do not envision a society where all possession is abolished but where only the greater part of personal property is abolished. When it comes to clothing, jewelry, household goods, hand tools, and so forth, they maintain that
these and the like must remain personal property. Particularly in times such as these, we should be most careful when we draw consequences from the Word of God. If it is decreed that all that is now personal property is simply to be taken away from its owners, the situation would of course be completely different. If a person considers, in light of or even on the basis of the eighth commandment, that a society where property is largely communal is forbidden by God, he or she is entirely mistaken. This becomes even more evident once we realize that this commandment was given to Israel in the desert when there was no land ownership; when no trading could be effected; and when personal possessions were limited almost exclusively to the clothes the people had taken with them, along with some household goods, cattle, jewelry, and hand tools.

A second misunderstanding we wish to clear up is the consequence some have drawn from Matthew 20:14–15, where Jesus in a parable tells of a landowner who hired workers for his vineyard and gave those who had put in a few hours of work the same as those who had labored the entire day. When those who had worked longer grumbled about this, Jesus continues, the landowner replied: “Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?” Some have concluded from this that Jesus sanctioned with his divine authority the concept of absolute ownership as it has come down to us especially by way of Roman law, and that consequently all who follow Jesus must acknowledge that every owner can do with his possessions as he pleases. That this is not the case will become clear when we take a somewhat closer look at Matthew 20:15. There are three things we wish to point out. First, it is not Jesus himself who says these words, but he rather places them in the mouth of a character he presents in his parable. The parables of Jesus are not pictures of virtue depicting people in their ideal so that every act and word of the characters he places on stage is to be to us as a rule; rather, his parables are taken from real life. He depicts people for us as they really are with their virtues and vices. In the parable of the lost son, the lost son is a miserable wretch; the man who hires him and gives him pig-slop to eat is a greedy farmer whose treatment of his slaves is a shame; the prostitutes on whom he wastes his possessions and who clean him out are women of the worst kind; and the older brother is a self-satisfied man who lacks any kind of noble impulse. Only the father emerges from this parable “clean.” The same applies to all of Jesus’ parables—especially the parable of the unjust judge. It does not in any way follow from the fact that the landowner, whom Jesus places on stage in the parable of the workers in the vineyard, speaks in this way that things really are as he says, but only that a man from Jesus’ time thought about that issue in this way rather than that.
In the second place, the words Jesus places in the mouth of the landowner in no way form a remark of unfair whimsy as if he meant: “I’m free to do with my belongings as I please.” The character the Lord gives him in this parable is much too noble for that. Rather, it is a matter of the landowner’s having free disposal over his belongings in order to do good. Jesus says that the landowner had come to an agreement with the workers he had hired first to pay them a certain amount per day. They had supplied the labor, and the landowner paid them the wages they were due. When there remained “unemployed” men at the market—that is, healthy and robust men who had been willing to work but unable to find it—he also took them into his service late in the afternoon. Proportionally, this latter group should have received only one tenth of what the others were given. If the men in the first group received one guilder, the latter would have gone home with a dime. This stirred something in the landowner’s heart, and he could not bear to see it. These men were without fault, for they had been willing to work but unable to find any. They, too, had to live, and perhaps even had a family. As result, a feeling of charity came over him and he thought: Also this man cannot do with less than a guilder. Here, a guilder for you, too! At this point those who had worked the entire day challenged his right to do that saying, “You may not do this. If you give them one guilder, you owe us ten.” It is to this charge that the landowner responded that he was not being unfair to them because they had agreed to work for one guilder and that he had the freedom to give to those other men more than they had, strictly speaking, earned.

In the third place, we point out that this interpretation is fully confirmed by the last words where the landowner adds: “Or are you envious because I am generous?” This is of course not a redundancy, but with it, the landowner explains what he had just said. What else could he mean but this?—You challenge my right to do good with that which is mine, and this comes from the fact that I am good while you are envious. As a result, every appeal to these words of Jesus as if he gives an official stamp of approval to the absolute concept of private ownership will have to be abandoned. Further, the owners who are so ready to appeal to the landowner in this parable would perhaps better bless themselves and society if they asked themselves whether they use their freedom to do good with their money as liberally as did the owner of this vineyard.

God’s Holy Word has been misused for so long that with the increasing seriousness of the times one should reflect seriously on how we can make room for the conviction that full ownership of all natural goods cannot belong to anyone but the Lord our God. What Scripture says about the owner as steward points us in the one and only safe direction, and Christ’s Church abandons her calling if she does not constantly and unceasingly preach and imprint on humankind the holy
truth that the Lord God is the only lawful owner, and that no person ever is or
can be anything but a steward over a part of that which belongs to God alone. All
Christians confess this in prayer, but *outside* of prayer they neither think of nor
act according to it. In order to know what Jesus himself thought of ownership,
people need only consider him as he walked on earth and proclaimed, “Foxes have
holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his
head” (Matt. 8:20). Ever since the beginning of his public ministry, Jesus lived
from things that were *given* to him, and he blessed not the rich man but the poor
man Lazarus. Along these lines, our Savior gave us in the fourth petition of the
Lord’s Prayer the true maxim for all property when he taught every person, rich
or poor, to pray every day again: *Our Father ... give us today our daily bread.*
Here more than anywhere else it is clear that Jesus wants you to consider all that
is yours as the property of your Father in heaven. After all, a child lives with his
father, and it is not the child but the father who owns all. It is clear that you are
to do this even when your food is waiting on the table, and that you are to *do*
this not only for a lavish meal but even a *mouthful of bread.* Even that piece of
bread on the table in front of you is not yours, but is the property of your Father
in heaven. It is also clear that you should ask for your *daily* food from your God
who is its owner, not once a month or once a week but every day again. Above
all, it is clear that you should never ask for that food for yourself without at the
same time asking for it for all people who need it as much as you do. What a
rich sentence this is, in language with golden simplicity: *Father ... give us today
our daily bread!* It is a petition of only six words, but if you could bring all loyal
citizens of this country to pray those six words with convicted heart, would
not suddenly all false concepts of ownership, all plutocracy, all worship of the
golden calf, and all socialism not suddenly disappear from the face of the earth?

We add in our exposition one last saying from Jesus: “The poor you will al-
ways have with you” (Matt. 26:11). People also appeal to these words to prove
to us that Jesus willed that there always be rich and poor people, and infer from
this that we would in fact act against Jesus’ will if we were to try and eliminate
poverty in our country. Such misuse of Jesus’ words always arouses our indigna-
tion. What was Jesus’ goal in his battle? Was it not to make *each and everyone*
without distinction overflow with heavenly affluence in his kingdom, to give
them *all* a place to sit at the Marriage Feast of the Lamb, and to invite them
to a “banquet of aged wine—the best of meats” (see Isa. 25:6)? These people
would now picture this same merciful Jesus, who was always so deeply moved
by human misery, as rising up in anger over you if you were to try to make the
lamentable poverty disappear from the earth. Does this not tend to blasphemy?
Is it not an insult to Jesus’ holy name? If the poor appeal to these words in order
to comfort themselves—let them be. However, those who have received a rich portion from God be careful never to use Jesus’ words in order to gloss over the hardness of their hearts. If you do this, you only sin against your very own soul.

There is nothing easier than to show that Jesus’ words do not intend what some conclude from them. Had Jesus said, “You will to the very end always have people who commit suicide,” would people conclude that we should make no effort to combat suicide? If that were indeed the case, it would be as if there were no difference between saying how things will always be out of knowledge of human nature and of what will always flow out of this sinful nature or saying how things must be by instituting a rule or promulgating an ordinance. The same distinction applies to Jesus’ words in Matthew 26. Some take them as if Jesus were instituting a rule as to how things must be until the final day so that if there were no longer any poor, we would have to try to ensure that there are. Yet, what Jesus said was nothing but a prophecy. He who knows the hearts of humankind and knows what consequences sin would continue to bring along with it to the very end, said to Judas: “The poor you will always have with you.” If, in contrast, it were indeed a rule for how things are to be, we suggest that today’s fortunate owners trade places for a year by making rich those who are now poor and to take on themselves the role of a poor person for an entire year. Would this not likewise be a way to fulfill the ordinance that they assume these words of Jesus to contain?

This, however, is not how they would want things to be, and for that reason it is so cruel, heartless, un-Christian, and offensive to the name of Jesus when those with great possessions appeal to this saying of our Savior in their mercilessness.
The Lord our God is the owner of all that exists, the sole and complete owner—he and no one else. Those in authority who continually tried to preach to all that God Almighty is the Sovereign over all people, but almost systematically suppressed the fact that the same God Almighty is also the owner of all property, made it all too clear that they were driven more by the desire to strengthen their own power than to honor their God. The Lord God then caused all winds of teaching to arise as a punishment in order to shake the unperturbed owners out of their dreams. Further, only the Church of Christ may claim that also on this issue she has throughout the centuries pointed to the only true and correct principle when she wrote down her confession that all that has been created belongs to God alone, and imprinted this on her mind. This principle is in direct conflict with the legal principle as we have inherited it from the world of Roman law, and the battle over property that continues to rage today is one between the Christian and the ancient Roman view. We say it this way on purpose for, while we are well aware that legal specialists are accustomed to speak of a contrast between the Roman and Germanic notions of property, instead the contrast with the Christian view runs even deeper and addresses us more directly as people who confess the Lord.

For this reason, we may not take our point of departure with this commandment from anywhere but creation. God’s creation was twofold in that he made people and things, and because both are his creatures, he has absolute control of disposition over them both. Consequently, one could very well say that God disposes as sovereign over all people and over all things. In itself, sovereignty means nothing but utmost authority, greatest exaltation, highest control of disposition,

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How many are your works, O Lord! In wisdom you made them all; the earth is full of your creatures.

—Psalm 104:24
and this can apply to both people and things. Because it is common nowadays to speak of sovereignty only as a concept that extends over conscious creatures, which themselves act as secondary causes under God, we commonly label total control of disposition over all things not as “sovereignty” but as “possession.” In its most complete sense, however, we understand “possession” to mean that someone has such great disposition over a thing that he alone has every say over it and no one else any say. If an owner is in some way dependent on a third party, in the disposition over his property he must still have absolute power. His right of ownership is complete if, and only if, he can himself choose to destroy it. Just as absolute owners claimed the right of life and death over their slaves, so every owner must have the right of life and death over everything he owns. This right is indeed exercised with respect to animals.

If the essence of the concept of absolute possession is as described above, it follows that ownership in that fullest sense can only come about through creation. Only that which I produce in an absolute sense is mine in the fullest sense of the word. Only I can decide to do with it as I want. If, on the other hand, something is not produced by me but by someone else and then given to me by the one who produced it, I am not free. This is so in the first place, because receiving a gift always makes one dependent; and, in the second place, because I have to accept it as the Creator made it. Absolute right of ownership can for that reason only be conceived of in God. He who created everything does with everything as he pleases. He alone has total control over all that exists. Thus, no one can own anything except insofar as he has received or stolen it from God, always either in dependence on or else in rebellion against him who created it. The principle that God is the owner of all that exists may for that reason not be considered only a religious idea. It is at the same time a legal principle given that as long as the absolute concept of ownership cannot be conceived of except in God, any form of ownership that people are thought to have surrenders its absolute character.

If God is indeed the sole and absolute owner of all things, it follows immediately that nobody, however unparalleled he may be in his riches, can apply an absolute right of ownership over even a single thing on earth. The Rothschilds or Goulds, regardless of the hundreds of millions they may have or have had in wealth, cannot say of even a single piece of bread on their table that they can do with it what they want. They may think they can say this as the greatest majority of people including the poorest in fact do, but it is simply not true. As long as God is the Creator of all and no human being can ever own anything except what God created, no mortal can ever own even the smallest thing independently of God. This is true not only of such things as a person’s cattle that came into being outside of him and were brought to him, but this is equally true of that which
man himself makes or helps to produce. Human beings help bring grain forth from the field and fruit from the trees that they plant and cultivate. Here people appear only as helping hands, but when it comes to the houses they build, the linen they weave, and the weapons they forge, they function to a much greater degree as origin and producer. In some cases, the human act can be so decisive that people appear to act literally as creators. As examples, one can think of a poem they sang, a canvas they painted, a piece of music they composed, or a book they wrote. All these are products where one hardly notices anything but human acts and where human dependence hardly surfaces at all. Yet, no matter how far the human act shows itself to extend in the case of such products, also here man’s freedom is merely an illusion. The farmer can sow, but only God can give growth; the arborist can plant, but only God can cause the fruit on the branches to ripen. A man builds a house, but he is unable to produce a single stone or a single piece of wood or iron out of nothing, and, what is more, in working on that stone, wood, or iron, he is bound to the design that God has given to them. It is the same with the wool that people spin and with the linen that comes from their looms. The same applies in no smaller degree to the products of their mental labor. Those who write poetry or prose do so in a language that exists outside of and independently of them. Those who compose do so within a world of tones over which they have no say whatsoever, and they become greater masters only in the measure that they immerse themselves in and subject themselves to the laws governing that world. Further, even where those who have immersed themselves in that language, world of tones and world of imagination show signs of brilliance and talent, that brilliance and talent are not of their own creation but are given to them by God and are for that reason bound to the degree, bounds and design that God has imposed on them.

The Word of God points to the potter time and again as the most free artisan because the clay he uses has almost no value while he has the power to form it or not form it, to form it in this or another way, or even to break it into pieces afterward. The potter is and ever remains dependent on the clay God had to create for him, on the make-up of the clay, on the wheel he uses for his work, on the fire to harden the clay into pottery, and no less on the movement of his fingers and feet. If his feet and his fingers become stiff with arthritis, even the potter is powerless before the clay. While we do at times use the word create for people and speak of a human creation especially for objects of art, these remain figurative expressions. In the true sense of the word only the Lord is and remains Creator because he alone has produced all matter on his own, he alone gave a law unto all things, he alone gives to each thing its nature, he alone has the power and capacity to do with his creatures as he pleases, and he alone in all
freedom determines for each thing its goal and purpose. Because humankind, on the contrary, never can produce matter but must accept it as given (i.e., with the law that it has been given and the nature with which it has been created), it is simply absurd to speak as if human beings have a free—that is, entirely unbound—control of disposition over anything, even if they do call it their own.

When we then confess that God and God alone is the owner of all things, we do not do this just to appear pious and even less because in Israel God was seen as the sole owner. Rather, we say this because it belongs to the nature of ownership and flows directly from our confession of God as Creator. Because God is the Creator of all, there can be no other Creator aside from him and together with him. The concept of Creator is exclusive. There can only be one creator, and the fact that he was the one who created puts all those who work with what he created in a position of dependence. A creator cannot alienate his property. God cannot say: “I no longer want to be owner of that part of my creation.” This would be possible if God were to let something go after creating it and to let it be controlled by some power residing within it. This is not the case, however. Nothing exists by virtue of a resident power internal to it, but every single object is maintained by the Lord’s omnipresent power. If God were to give an object away in the sense of withdrawing from it, that object would in that very instant be destroyed. God can give in no other way than by still holding on to that object. It cannot leave even his hand for a single moment. God does not as Creator have some things that he keeps with him and others that he places at the farthest edges of his estate. Instead, every object is always present to him, and his divine power works in every object at each and every moment of time. Even when he gives certain earthly possessions to man, he never allows them to leave his hand completely; before and after he keeps the things he created in existence. No man can therefore hold onto them in any other way but as God holds onto them for him, and he can never own anything except under the condition that God’s power remains free and that the law God gave to that object is honored. On his horse, a rider may think that he is lord and master, but God and not he remains the creator of that noble animal. For that reason the rider cannot use the horse in any other way than God willed it; he cannot make his horse do anything but that for which God gave the horse the abilities and skills. The moment God ceases to bear and sustain the life of that animal through his omnipotence, the rider loses his ability to keep that horse as his property. The animal dies, and the rider loses it.

If someone responds to the above that it does contain some truth but that when we speak of the right of ownership we do so not in the highest sense of the word but as one person’s rights over against another, and we of course already suppose that all belongings are bound to their nature. This is of little consequence against
our argument. Even if I were to think of ownership exclusively in terms of the relationship it entails between one person over against another, the concept of sovereignty still brings me back again and again to the Lord God because he has sovereign command over those two people whose right of ownership you are regulating. Whether you think of the object or of the person, you must always take your point of departure in the Lord our God because both object and person exist only by his grace. He created both the object and the person. Thus, too, the people whose right of ownership you seek to regulate are not free to act as they will and please, but in the regulation of ownership both are bound to submit themselves in obedience to God. The eighth commandment itself shows this. From Sinai, the Lord places himself between the two, involves himself directly in the issue of ownership, and says to all people of all nations: “You shall not steal”; furthermore, “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house … his ox or donkey” (Matt. 19:18; Ex. 20:17). At the present time, these commandments are set aside and ignored in order to come to some definition of ownership outside of God, as is done by many of today’s jurists, but in this way they neither do nor can make progress. This was possible for a certain period of time when, by virtue of respect for God’s law, there was at least generally some fixed concept of ownership. This, however, is no longer the case now that, due to the waning respect for this law, the first principles for the right of ownership are no longer fixed. This situation also brought to rise the socialist, communist, and nihilist theories as a just punishment from God over the pride of owners who imagined that they could safeguard their Mammon rights outside of God. These theories, as absurd as they in themselves are in most cases, thus perform an excellent service for laying bare once again the foundations, and for forcing humanity to consider once more the first foundations also of ownership. If you, today’s happy owners, try to found your right of ownership outside of God, on nothing but your human insight, your tradition and what you consider to be a necessity, we will give you—as the consistent socialists say—a taste of your own medicine. We, too, will regulate the right of ownership outside of God, according to our own insight, another tradition, and an entirely different necessity. However, we will regulate it in a way that is entirely different from yours.

It may seem strange, but, on the basis of that standpoint, nothing can be said against what we just said. For the assertion of one is just as good as that of another. What they call the “tradition of misery” has as great a claim to legitimacy as what others call the “tradition of the social order.” When they point to the necessity to end the existing misery, they have as firm a standpoint as those who emphasize the necessity to maintain the stimulus of private ownership. If the discussion is set up in that way, it remains just a matter of one opinion over
against that of another; no decision can be made; and, in the absence of a verdict from a higher judge, the last resort will be for one person to fight another for ownership, in which battle the strong will defeat the weak. If you push away all higher sanctions, you must end up with the right of force.

Does this mean that God in his Word gave us a set law for the way and manner in which the earth’s goods are to be divided among its 1.4 billion inhabitants? Not at all. Whoever sees the Mosaic Law in this way entirely misunderstands its meaning. Can one as a result deny that the whole issue of ownership presents itself in an entirely different way to those who recognize God as the highest owner as opposed to those who would know of nothing but people and the things they pursue? Do not forget here that in itself the stimulus in our nature to accumulate all kinds of goods is already very strong. Hunger acts as a powerful sword, and every morning and evening our half-full stomachs press on us. You are cold, and you need to warm up. You are naked, and you need to be clothed. You are out in the open air, and you need a dwelling place. All are needs not of your own invention, but they are given in your very nature. They never let you go and follow you everywhere and control your entire life. Further, even apart from these pressing needs the temptation and draw to obtain for ourselves a large number of earthly goods is incredibly strong. Think only of the word money—money is a power that puts within your grasp all the enjoyment, joy, and bliss the world has to offer. Yet the earth’s goods extend not only so far as to satisfy your earthly needs that you can control and suppress to a certain degree but also much of what you consider holy depends on money. The first thing needed for Christ’s Church to be able to reveal itself and exercise power, or to take up the battle for fundamental principles, is a campaign fund. Without money, it is impossible in any part of life to make propaganda, and it costs money to organize even a meeting and to distribute literature. Never has there been an election where the victory did not to a large degree depend on money.

What shall we further say about how you raise your children and about many other interests that are even dearer to us and are most tightly tied to money? Was not the whole battle waged against us by unbelievers over the question of schools fought with the superior strength of the state’s money? Does that battle not continue down to today? Does life not show how even the questions as to whether you will reach your destiny in your marriage and will fulfill your true and full financial potential in this world are so often determined only by the counter question as to whether or not you are in line for money? If you add also the whole question of charity, you will have to ask yourself what delight you would have to deprive your soul of if you did not have extra money to give away and how much those who cannot afford that luxury of love miss out on because
they are themselves needy. It is thus no wonder at all that the battle over money rages in this world with such bitter cruelty and such lack of compromise. It cannot be any other way, and must be so. Toward the end of the last century, it was quite popular to speak of “earthly mire,” but that language was restricted almost exclusively to sentimental songs and sermons. As soon as they left church and were soberly occupied in drawing up their books rather than lingering in their sentimentality, both the preacher and his listeners knew better. This is the very reason why the way this piercing incentive will manifest itself in you depends entirely on the standpoint you take. Therefore, it goes without saying that as soon as you know and confess that everything in this world belongs to God and that you depend on God in the fullest sense and are responsible to him when it comes to your belongings, the incentive for money will work in you in a different way. Among people on earth, you already treat the objects, which do not belong to you but have only been borrowed for use or entrusted to you, in an entirely different way compared to those for which you are accountable to no one on earth. This same all-governing distinction will fully determine your view of ownership as soon as you know and confess that nothing on earth belongs to you, but that everything is the Lord’s; that you have only borrowed it to use; that it has been entrusted to you by him for a time and with a definite purpose; and that he will hold you accountable for what you have done with his property. In this way all your belongings are immediately placed under a higher rule, subjected to a moral order, and serve not to raise you up in your pride but place you under a greater responsibility before God. If someone who has thirty million or more were to know what it means—at times, for many years on end—to direct such an enormous amount according to God’s order and to his glory, the foolish and feverish thirst to increase that huge treasure even more would at once be quenched. Moreover, great possessions are then more a burden than a delight, and knowing that such an enormous fortune can be had only because others lack what they need produces bitterness instead of desire. Of course, those who do not feel that their duties and responsibilities only increase as their possessions grow simply fix their eyes on the power it gives them and are only out to increase that power. Those who feel and acknowledge that every added million raises their responsibility enormously and multiplies the weight of their duty acknowledge the great wisdom of what the preacher said: “Give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread” (Prov. 30:8).

Once the realization that “God is owner, and we—great or small—are stewards” penetrates us once and for all, the absurd notion that we can do with our property as we want can arise in no sound mind. What our fathers imprinted on their children, that it is sin to waste even a single piece of bread for which God
Status Quaestio

had caused the grain to grow, expresses the general rule that we are first of all to ask God his will for all the possessions with which he has entrusted us. The growing animal protection movement undoubtedly has an unhealthy side to it, and it is at times revolting to see how animals are given royal treatment while people are allowed to die of want. Inasmuch as the animal protection movement has this tendency, it should also be resisted. Yet, as the next chapter will show more clearly, this does not take away the fact that a deep truth also lies at its foundation: Even when it comes to animals, man cannot do with them as he pleases, but they have rights over man insofar as God has grounded those rights in their nature.
From a biblical point of view, there can be no such thing as unlimited and absolute right of ownership. It is a serious misunderstanding to take the phrase “God alone is owner, we are stewards” as nothing but a pious expression that imposes no rule and places limits on our exercise of that right. On two levels, we want to illustrate that this is not at all the case: first, for the use we may make of our possessions; and, second, for the regulations imposed by the government.

In regard to the first point, you become most aware of it when you think of a slave or a beast of burden. Even though slavery has—formally, at least—been so far banished from our society that we can hardly imagine how one person can ever be another’s property, this does not undo the fact that until a few centuries ago, slavery, serfdom, and other similar relationships existed all over the world, and that at present in more than one place slavery still exists in different forms. For those who consider God as the owner of all creatures, it is at once certain that slavery is evil. I would never be able to own “a person” in any other way than as a steward, and my ownership of that “person” would never be allowed to conflict with the relationship that exists between that person and God as his owner. Because this relationship demands that the person created after the image of his owner be morally free and directly responsible to God, it is unthinkable and absurd that one person could ever exercise right of ownership over another. If, on the other hand, the realization that God alone is the owner of all creatures including humankind should wear away and disappear from the human mind, I would have no need to seek God’s ordinance as it concerns mankind. The only thing I would need to ask myself about any other person is how I can overpower

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The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is mine and you reside in my land as foreigners and strangers.

—Leviticus 25:23
him and become his master. Consequently, there would be no principal difference between a slave I obtain in a slave hunt and a horse I capture on the prairies. The only difference would be that a slave is usually much easier to catch and, once caught, much more profitable. Once the awareness returns that God as owner alone has disposition over man and that he cannot place one person at another’s absolute disposal without at the same time coming into conflict with his creation ordinance, then do we cut the notion of slavery down at its very root—even if the notion of slavery continues to bloom for a certain time after being cut off at its root, as was the case in Israel. That people were willing to follow only as driven by necessity, follows from the fact that slave owners cannot acknowledge that their slaves belong to God unless they at the same time recognize and confess that God is not only their slaves’ but also their own absolute owner. Therefore, as long as their hearts remain unbroken and proud over against God and as long as they refuse to place themselves in the hand of God as their owner, sinful men and women also cannot see their slaves as God’s property. It is just as clear that the doctrine of the gospel, “that my only comfort in life and death is that I am not my own, but belong to my faithful Saviour” (HC, Q&A 1), necessarily leads people to see themselves once again as God’s property. Further, it can be no other than that, when they see themselves in this way, they in the end must see this also of their slaves. As result, the gospel doctrine had to lead eventually to the slow undermining of the system of slavery as a whole. Slavery is a curse that had fallen on our human race. When we no longer wanted to be slaves to God, that is, when we no longer wanted to belong to him in full ownership as his creatures so that he could do with us entirely as he pleased, as punishment one man became the slave of another, and in cannibalism we only sank one step lower because it placed man on the same level not just as pack animals but also as wild animals that are captured in order to be slaughtered and devoured. God had created man according to his image, but people thought it good to relinquish that great honor and consequently came to bear the image of an ox that walks before the plough or a deer that is caught and consumed for food.

God’s right as the only owner comes out when you think of animals. By nature, no one has the right to seize an animal and to slaughter it for food. At least, Christians who hold to God’s Word may not think they do. They know that it was God who said first to Noah, and in Noah to us: “Everything that lives and moves about will be food for you…. I now give you everything” (Gen. 9:3). Only because God gives the animals to us and further grants us permission to slaughter and eat them do we as human beings have the right to use animals in this way. In no way is it true that you have this right simply by virtue of being a human. The commonly accepted view that people may do with an animal just
as they please because it is only an animal must for that reason be resisted by all Christians because the animals are not yours but belong to God. You do not have the least right to them because you did not create them. It is only once God gives you a right of use over animals that you are free to use and employ them in that way. Without God’s permission, you have no right to haul a single fish out of the water and to kill it, to shoot down and pluck a single bird, or hunt and slay any game. Animal rights activists do good work in that they seek to regain acceptance for the conviction that the right people have convinced themselves to have over animals to do with them as they please is simply absurd. To this extent, these fighters also deserve our support. However, we should advise them no longer to base themselves on a false standpoint. Therefore, they take their stand for animals by attributing rights to them by virtue of being animals, and in order to achieve this they come to the false thesis that animals have some kind of immortal soul just as we do. In this way, they try to make people consider an animal as a kind of human being of a second order with rights over against us who are humans of a higher order. This is simply absurd. They would have a much stronger stand, find greater acceptance among Christians, and receive more support in the public conscience if they were to return to the Word of God and to show from the Word that every animal finds its owner in God rather than in man and that humanity for that reason has no say over an animal at all except insofar as it has received the animals from God. Everyone can decide for themselves whether they want to be vegetarians and abstain from eating meat. Nowhere has God commanded people that they must eat meat. However if the animal rights advocates want to forbid the eating of meat on the ground that we are not allowed to slaughter and eat animals, they abolish the explicit statement of God’s Word, and thereby abolish God’s right over animals. Because of this, they themselves actually fuel the cruelty against animals among those who are of the greatest majority by far, and who would know of no higher principles and thus free themselves from God’s ordinances. The animal rights advocates go to battle against the vivisectionists, but their false theory only fosters the cruelty of the latter.

Up to this point, we have considered animal rights only from one perspective. However, we must also pay attention to the right, which is never anything but conditional, we may exercise over animals when we use them as pack or draft animals. Here no one is allowed to say, “I do as I please with my horse or ox or donkey.” No, also in this use of animals you are bound to God’s ordinance concerning them. Much of this ordinance is already being respected at present by those who keep pack animals because God has so ordained things that resistance against it means that the pack animal will decrease in value. If you do not feed your ox, horse, or donkey, it will waste away and die. If you do not help
an animal when it is sick, you will lose it. If you do not protect it from the cold, it will wither away. The animals’ natural needs, therefore, already incite us to honor God’s ordinances concerning them. If things are left at that, this honoring of God’s ordinances is merely a matter of self-interest. You can only speak of true fear of God in your relationship with your animals when you care for them because your desire is to be righteous and because “the righteous care for the needs of their animals” (Prov. 12:10). Then you listen to God’s command not to muzzle an ox while it is treading grain, not to catch a bird that is sitting on her eggs, and to draw an animal that has fallen into a ditch out of it (cf. Deut 25:4; 22:6, 4). Then you place yourself in the life of your animal so as to learn something of its life and to be set on treating your animal as God, who is its owner, desires of you as his steward. Only then will cruelty against animals be rooted out from this earth. It is incomprehensible that there are towns where year after year the catechism is taught, the Word is preached, and home visitations are made, without any serious instruction concerning the way in which the farmer is to honor the law of God Almighty as it extends also to the treatment of animals.

Of course, what applies to slaves and animals also extends to all other things people call their own and for which God as the sole owner on earth has determined the nature and manner of the way we are to treat them. “Listen,” the prophet Isaiah cries out:

Listen and hear my voice; pay attention and hear what I say. When a farmer plows for planting, does he plow continually? Does he keep on breaking up and working the soil? When he has leveled the surface, does he not sow caraway and scatter cumin? Does he not plant wheat in its place, barley in its plot, and spelt in its field? His God instructs him and teaches him the right way. Caraway is not threshed with a sledge, nor is the wheel of a cart rolled over cumin; caraway is beaten out with a rod, and cumin with a stick. Grain must be ground to make bread; so one does not go on threshing it forever. The wheels of a threshing cart may be rolled over it, but one does not use horses to grind grain. All this also comes from the Lord Almighty, whose plan is wonderful, whose wisdom is magnificent. (Isa. 28:24–29; italics added)

There is nothing to add to these wonderful words of the prophet. It is entirely clear that no one can do with a tree or plant as he wishes. People must sow when the time God has intended for sowing comes and adjust themselves in everything to the ordinance that God has given to the animal kingdom. That this is the way things are, however, is hardly evident in the case of plants because people already obey God’s ordinance of their own accord. Those who do not are looked on as fools. In the end, the same also applies to metals, all kinds of stones, fire, and
water. All of this has been given to you by the one and only owner, but far from having these things at your free disposition, you are quite strictly bound to the nature of each thing and to the laws to which each is subjected. These are called the “laws of nature,” but what are they if not God’s ordinances from which you cannot free yourself in the use of your belongings?

This important theme could be extended much further if we also consider whether man is free to take for himself as much as he wants from what is his—our goal being to demonstrate that the Lord God has also placed human beings in their body according to a set ordinance concerning daily intake of protein, nitrogen, and so forth and to demonstrate that all excess is punished immediately by illness or nausea, or later on by other ailments. The same is true of alcoholism. Rather than going into greater detail on this, we wish to point out as an aside that it is in particular by way of money, in its function as the measure of wealth and the means of exchange that humankind has lost its grasp on the knowledge that God’s ordinances govern all their belongings. The evil was allowed to progress even further when paper replaced money, so that a kind of property came into being that was subject to almost no natural power or ordinance. It was not ownership of animals, iron, or copper but specifically of money that introduced into people’s spirits the foolish notion of omnipotence and thus deluded them so as to think that they had an absolute right of disposition over all money and over all that has monetary value or can be obtained for money. Particularly because money is free from all natural bonds and because the only thing that can restrain the power of money is a moral bond, ownership not of natural objects but of money has become the cause both of the false notions of ownership that have found acceptance, as well as of the incredible abuses that have crept into the distribution of wealth. To this extent, there is a real foundation of truth to the current reaction against what is called capital. Already among the Israelites, the Lord sought to restrain the terrible evil that comes from money, and so he gave them laws. It goes without saying that money as such gains power especially when money becomes something productive, and when the power of reproduction that properly belongs to plants and animals alone is also given to it. Just as animals produce animals and plants produce plants, so money is also made to produce money through interest. It was with a view to this that the Lord commanded in Leviticus 25:36–37: “Do not take interest or any profit from them, but fear your God, so that they may continue to live among you. You must not lend them money at interest or sell them food at a profit.” Although these stipulations concerning interest have been loosened by people who claim they only decry usury, this interpretation actually conflicts with the real meaning of Leviticus 25:36–37. This passage really does mean that money should be lent in return for
repayment of the principal without increase, and it is a sign of the deep fall of
today’s Jews that they who claim to live under the Mosaic Torah have become
the greatest nation of usurers in Europe and Asia.¹ They justify this by saying
that Leviticus 25:36 only forbids the practice of usury with their brothers, and
for that reason they take a double and triple usury, as much as 20 percent more,
from Christians. Our Reformed theologians, too, have often considered how, on
the basis of Leviticus 25:36, the limits that this commandment offers against the
unholy side of money’s power can be applied also in our days in order to restrain
evil. All of our theologians from Calvin onward have warned against the corrup-
tion that would overtake society if the misuse of others’ need and one’s own
financial power were allowed to continue and thus elevate money to a power
in itself. They were entirely correct when they pointed out that Scripture not
only forbids what we negatively call usury but without doubt also demands that
money’s reproductive power be severely limited. They usually concluded that the
only permissible rate of interest was equal to the productive power that a sum of
amount really does have over a set period of time. It is thus entirely in the spirit
of the Reformation to try to restrict, just as our economists are at present intent
on doing, the procreating power of money. The more the interest rates rise, the
further we distance ourselves from the ideal. The more they fall and the more
it is made either impossible or else a punishable offense to surpass a particular
interest rate, the closer we come to the ideal of Scripture. More careful atten-
tion to Leviticus 25:36–37 would have spared us a great deal of social misery,
shameful dishonesty, and lost fortunes.

    Thus, we automatically transition to the second point of discussion: the duty
of the government. It can be no other than that the government regulates all right
of ownership. The supposition that the right of ownership is regulated on its own
by social relationships is as a whole false, and to the degree that it does contain
some truth, it does not exonerate the government that as God’s handmaid has
indeed been charged with the responsibility to ensure that the regulation of the

¹ Ed. note: The historic association rooted in specific social contexts of Jews with usury
has been an occasion for anti-Semitic discrimination. The origins of this phenomenon
and the stereotypically negative assessment of Jews by many Christians are to be
found in the long history of Christian Europe. A particular reading of Scripture, which
Kuyper alludes to, allows for Jews to lend at interest to non-Jews. When combined
with the legal prohibition against Jewish participation in many other professions, “The
economic forces pushing Jews out of other occupations were matched by others pull-
ing them into the money trade.” See Jonathan Penslar, Shylock’s Children: Economic
and Jewish Identity in Modern Europe (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of
right of ownership does not lead to the ruin of society. This duty of the government is also pointed to in the laws that God himself gave to Israel concerning the right of ownership. In that these laws were given to Israel—that is, to a particular nation in a particular land and in definite circumstances—they are not to be taken over as such into our constitution, but they do have a twofold lasting value in pointing out: (1) that the government is to direct the distribution of wealth, and (2) that it must be determined which basic principles are to govern this direction. These basic principles essentially divide into two, the one pertaining to buying and selling and the other to the right of inheritance. Both, it should be added, have a particular regard to land as a special possession, which in the case of Israel was also their main possession. Israel began with an equal distribution of land so that every tribe, every clan of every tribe, every house of every clan, and indeed every family within every house first received from God a nearly equal piece of land as a loan. From this land come bread and the wine that delights the human soul, and it was the Lord’s will that at the outset his people would be placed in a situation where all had equal enjoyment of the land. This at the same time created the private and distinct right of ownership, as is evident especially in that one could become poor or rich as the lazy or careless Israelites lost their land through sale while the clever and hardworking Israelites increased their land by acquisition. However, God gave provisions in his law so that the bitter consequences of this private right of ownership would not continue for impoverished families throughout their generations. If a father had been lazy and careless, his son—if he was hardworking—was not to be without a chance of regaining ownership. Then, vice versa, the clever and hardworking man was himself indeed to profit from his assiduity, but there was no reason for his lazy son to end up in a position over the hardworking son of a lazy man. This was the reason behind the law that determined that after a human life span all real estate that had been sold out of necessity was to return to its former owner. Laziness was punished with loss, but the loss would not extend to the following generations. Diligence was rewarded with increased possessions but only for a time. This is the deep sense of the law of the Year of Jubilee as well as of the law of redemption that we do not discuss here.

The above yields two far-reaching economic principles. The first is the principle that land must be governed by a different right of ownership than movable property. The second principle is that inequality of possession, which follows as a natural and necessary consequence from the difference between lazy people and squanderers on the one hand and the industrious and moderate spenders on the other hand, should not pass a certain limit but always remain within a certain boundary. In a land where the right of ownership of land and of real estate is
regulated according to these principles, the lamentable contrast between owners and nonowners and between the immensely rich and the utterly poor, which these days is the curse on all social relationships, would not have arisen. At present the situation in Europe is such that, if within one family there was once a member who through his efforts succeeded in accumulating a large part of what was originally in the hands of others, then centuries later his descendants still retain these possessions—at times even without investing any energy at all. Conversely, if a family once had a member who neglected and squandered everything, the curse of poverty continues to oppress his descendants so that they no longer have the chance by their own efforts to regain the property that was once lost. The principles of the law that God gave to the Israelites combat such a situation. It is a law that in a remarkable way produces a harmony in a pursuit involving opposites, on the one hand to collect all right of ownership in one person through unrestrained freedom, and on the other hand against the tyranny of equality that removes from human energy every positive stimulus it has.

Finally, we must give attention to the right of inheritance that is clearly founded in the Word of God and cannot be abolished without violating the principles of God’s Word. Scripture does not understand a nation as a collection of individuals but as a nation that exists organically in its generations and families. In God’s Word, the rule holds true that just as there is continuity from one generation to the next there must also be continuity of possession in the line of those generations. Possession of an estate is to have another body, and just as the generations continue bodily, they must propagate themselves in the enjoyment of inherited property. The right of inheritance in Israel maintained the right of sons and daughters, of brothers and of the brothers of fathers, and even of more distant blood relations for as long as there was progeny within that family.

This far-reaching right of inheritance could thus function in Israel simply because through the law of the Year of Jubilee, together with the original equal distribution of land, and through this right of inheritance, there could never be either sustained poverty or overly great accumulation of possessions in any single family. In Israel, the right of inheritance was not intended to allow fortunes to be amassed but rather to secure the bond between members of one family and to maintain the organic bond of the nation. Only from this point of view may one appeal to Israel’s right of inheritance as a principle and as a revelation of God’s will—and then preferably just as in Israel, with the preferential right of the oldest son who received a double portion held intact, so that primogeniture retains its role in strengthening the family bonds. It hardly needs to be pointed out that our current inheritance right conflicts with this, not only in that not even the least consideration is given to the necessary division of land but especially
in that monetary capital has become a power, which once accumulated, in the end drains away without consideration of blood relationship to anyone who in any way stands in a relationship to the defunct owner. All rights have been taken away from the firstborn. The result of all this is that the contrast between a class of those who own way too much and of those who own way too little remains, so that the right of inheritance no longer serves to strengthen the moral notion of familial bonds and instead serves to do little else but maintain the contrast between owner and nonowner. The situation has now become so bad that consideration is already being given as to whether or not the law should prescribe a limit to all fortunes, whether or not inheritance laws should be restricted to closer degrees, and even whether or not the state should in some cases be able to inherit. The third question aims at the very same goal as Israel’s law did, namely, that overly accumulated wealth flow back to those who have been overly robbed—albeit that achievement of this goal is here sought through the wrong channels. For the state never can inherit because it stands entirely outside of the idea of the family on which all rights of inheritance are based. Rather than allowing the state to inherit, it would be much better if the government were once again to regulate land ownership, interest rates, firstborn rights, and rights of inheritance in such a way that the repulsive inequality between powerful capitalists and defenseless citizens remains within certain limits as well as in terms of time.