

Before we can begin a devotional through the Heidelberg Catechism, we must first know a little about it. The Heidelberg Catechism is one of the great doctrinal documents of the Reformation era. It is in many ways similar to one of our denominational doctrinal standards, the Westminster Confession of Faith with its Larger and Shorter Catechisms. Theologically, both are from the Reformed tradition. It was commissioned by Elector Frederick III who was the sovereign of the Electoral Palatinate from 1559 to 1576. It is attributed to the entire faculty at the time of the University of Heidelberg, and “all the superintendents and prominent servants of the church.” While it is attributed to a large number, its principal author was Zacharias Ursinus (1534-83).

Ursinus was a German Reformed theologian and Protestant reformer. Interesting enough, he enrolled at the University of Wittenberg, the same University that Luther had been a professor at, and for seven years boarded with Philipp Melanchthon, collaborator with and then successor to Luther. Melanchthon was in many ways the intellectual leader of the Lutheran Reformation and its first systematic theologian. Melanchthon praised Ursinus often for his intellect.

Ursinus, though, didn’t remain a Lutheran. Upon leaving the University of Wittenberg, he began to study under prominent Reformation scholars in Strasbourg, Basel, Lausanne, and Geneva. Studying under these scholars greatly influenced him. Upon returning to Wroclaw, he published a pamphlet on the sacraments; this pamphlet was much more Reformed than Lutheran. Ursinus’s more reformed leanings greatly influenced Frederick III, and while he was in name a Lutheran, he leaned very heavily toward Reformed doctrines.

Frederick commissioned the writing of the Heidelberg to provide balance to a very tenuous time. The Peace of Augsburg had granted toleration of Lutheranism within the empire where the ruler was Lutheran. Frederick wanted to provide more theological balance and toleration for Reformed doctrine. The Catechism in many ways was written to defend Reformed theology against Roman Catholic, Anabaptist, and Gnesio-Lutheran theology¹. Each of its statements is based on Biblical “source” texts, note these aren’t proof texts. Frederick used the language of “source” in his defense at the Diet of Augsburg when he was called to answer charges that he had violated the Peace of Augsburg.

While the Westminster and the Heidelberg share a theological history, they were written under very different circumstances. A product of these differences is their

¹Throughout this introduction there are references to Lutheranism. After the death of Martin Luther the peace and unity of the Lutheran church quickly began to erode. Melanchthon held a wide range of views that were different than Luther’s. Melanchthon held views that were more in line with Roman Catholicism on original sin and the role of works in the life of the believer while holding more distinctively Reformed views on the Sacraments. On the other end of the spectrum were the Gnesio-Lutherans who were more in line with the Reformed doctrines of grace, but more Catholic in their sacramental theology. The Heidelberg is a distinctively Reformed document. While Luther was in many ways the spark of the Reformation he and by extension Lutheranism hold doctrinal views that are different than those of Calvin, Knox, and Zacharias Ursinus. Reformed doctrine therefore is distinct and different than that of Lutheran doctrine and theology.

tone, and this is clearly seen in how they start. The first question of the Westminster is, "What is the chief end of man?" This is quite abstract. The Heidelberg begins with, "What is your only comfort in life and in death?" and the answer begins, "That I am not my own, but belong – body and soul, in life and death – to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ." Thus, one can see that the language of the Heidelberg is much more personal. This is because of the environment in which it was produced. The more personal tone of the Heidelberg is, I believe, appropriate for this time. For instance, we are living our lives in an age of social distancing, where for a season what is "normal" of life has changed, and we live with a sense of anxiety and worry either over a virus or over the loss of work, income, alone time, and/or social interaction. The personal tone is key.

I hope and pray over the next few weeks (or however long this lasts) that this devotional will be edifying and encouraging, and that God will use it to grow our faith and love for him.

Week 1 “Heidelberg Catechism” Devotional

Intro:

“We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.”

You probably recognize the words of the preamble to the U.S. Constitution, but rarely do we think about their purpose. Preamble, according to the Merriam-Webster is, “an introductory statement” or an “introductory fact or circumstance.” It states the reasons for or intent of what is to follow. The first two questions of the Heidelberg Catechism operate in many ways as a preamble does. As we begin this week with the first two questions, take them to heart so that you can see how they provide an important introduction, as well as an overall summary, for the questions that follow.

Pray:

Ask God to reveal in you the places where you are looking for Hope outside of Him, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, renew in you a heart that finds its rest and hope in the finished work of Christ our Savior.

Questions:

Question 1:

Q. What is your only comfort in life and death?

A. That I am not my own.^[1] but belong with body and soul, both in life and in death,^[2] to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ.^[3] He has fully paid for all my sins with His precious blood^[4], and has set me free from all the power of the devil.^[5] He also preserves me in such a way^[6] that without the will of my heavenly Father not a hair can fall from my head;^[7] indeed, all things must work together for my salvation.^[8] Therefore, by His Holy Spirit He also assures me of eternal life^[9] and makes me heartily willing and ready from now on to live for Him.^[10]

[1] I Cor. 6:19, 20 [2] Rom. 14:7-9. [3] I Cor. 3:23; Tit. 2:14. [4] I Pet. 1:18, 19; I John 1:7; 2:2. [5] John 8:34-36; Heb. 2:14, 15; I John 3:8. [6] John 6:39, 40; 10:27-30; II Thess. 3:3; I Pet. 1:5. [7] Matt. 10:29-31; Luke 21:16-18. [8] Rom. 8:28. [9] Rom. 8:15, 16; II Cor. 1:21, 22; 5:5; Eph. 1:13, 14. [10] Rom. 8:14.

Question 2:

Q. What must you know to live and die in the joy of this comfort?

A. Three things: first, how great my sin and misery are;^[1] second, how I am set free from all my sins and misery;^[2] third, how I am to thank God for such deliverance.^[3]

[1] Romans 3:9-10; 1 John 1:10; [2] John 17:3; Acts 4:12; 10:43; [3] Matthew 5:16; Romans 6:13; Ephesians 5:8-10; 2 Timothy 2:15; 1 Peter 2:9-10

Commentary:

As it has been noted, these first two questions form a preamble to the rest of the Catechism in many ways. They summarize for us where our hope lies and the good news of the Gospel. The answer to the second question follows a loose structure of Paul's letter to the Roman church: guilt to grace to gratitude. We are reminded that we were made by Christ and for Christ. Because of these truths, we have a hope and a future that is secure even in the midst of life's uncertainties, if we trust in him.

Why do we belong to Christ? The answer lays out for us three principle reasons: He made us, By His blood he redeemed us, His sovereign providential care for us. The first question also reminds us that because we belong to Christ, we have been given the Holy Spirit. In his last days, Jesus told his disciples that it was better for them that he departs because he would send a Comforter in his place. Jesus returned to his place with the Father, and sent his Spirit to be with his disciples and all who believe, present with God's power and peace. Our comfort in uncertain times is none other than the Spirit of God.

The answer to the second question may come as a surprise. To know this comfort, we must first know..." *how great my sin and misery are.*" This answer reminds me of Calvin's words as he writes, "Nearly all wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves." What did Calvin mean by those words? I think it is clear what he meant when we see them alongside the answer to the second question of the Catechism. For Calvin, we only begin to seek after God when we grow displeased with ourselves, and that displeasure begins when we start to see and understand our great sin and the misery that comes from it.

Though, "Misery" in the Heidelberg isn't used as we would normally use the word. It is not the sense of unhappiness but rather a condition of alienation from God. It is an objective reality that our sin has created. So, in order for you and I to live in the joy of this great comfort, we must first know our desperate need for a Savior; for Christ. In order to enjoy the benefits of God, we need to know how lost and desperate we are. When, by the power of the Spirit, we begin to see our great need through the Spirit and become receptive to the great gift of grace that is Christ himself. Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

Reflection:

From: Henri Nouwen, "The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming"

At issue here is the question: "To whom do I belong? To God or the world?" Many of my daily preoccupations suggest that I belong more to the world than to God. A little criticism makes me angry, and a little rejection makes me depressed. A little praise raises my spirits, and a little success excites me. It takes very little to raise me up or thrust me down. Often, I am like a small boat on the ocean, completely at the mercy of its waves. All the time and energy I spend in keeping some kind of balance and preventing myself from being tipped over and drowning shows that my life is mostly a struggle for survival: not a holy struggle, but an anxious struggle resulting from the mistaken idea that it is the world that defines me.... The world's love is and always will be conditional. As long as I keep looking for my true self in the world of conditional love, I will remain "hooked" to the world – trying, failing, and trying again. It is a world that fosters addictions because what it offers cannot satisfy the deepest craving of my heart.

Scripture Readings:

1 Peter 5:7 (memorize this week if you are able)

John 10:27-30

Matthew 10:29-30

Ephesians 1:13-14

Luke 15:11-32

Questions for Reflection:

What are ways you are seeking comfort currently? What is it about those things that continually drive you to them instead of God? What idols do your places of comfort reveal in you? Where those comforts fail, what promises of God remind you that he will never fail as your idols have?

What are some times and places in your life you have seen and known God's comfort?

How does it make you feel to know that God is with you and for you, even in the midst of uncertainty and difficulty? What, if anything, makes this hard to believe?