

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	The Heidelberg Catechism		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	1		Gary L.W. Johnson
Text:	Romans 14:7 and others		
Date:	August 17, 2014 a.m.		

Guilt, Grace and Gratitude

In the early 1560s Frederick III (1516-76), Elector Palatine desired that his subjects be led to a 'devout knowledge and fear of the Almighty and his holy Word of salvation'. He commissioned a group of theologians and ministers to compose a catechetical summary of biblical truth that could be committed to memory and be an encouragement to personal faith and growth in Christ. The final version was approved by the Synod of Heidelberg (1563), the city lending its name to the catechism.

The *Heidelberg Catechism* follows the pattern of the Epistle to the Romans. It opens with the question 'What is your only comfort in life and in death?', and then examines the realities of human sin and misery (Rom. 1-3:20); salvation in Christ, including faith and repentance (Rom. 3:21-11:36); and the Christian life of thankful obedience in response to God's grace in Christ (Rom. 12-16). The catechism stands as a faithful testimony to the ancient Christian faith in its scripturally derived shape and content, and further expressed in its exposition and application of the Apostles' Creed, the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, the Ten Commandments, and the Lord's Prayer.¹

The Catechism presented 129 questions with their answers, backed up by more than seven hundred Bible references. The authors said they wanted it to be an echo of the Bible. Frederick pointed out that the references had been selected "with great pains" to give the best possible authority for its claims. A nice thing about the Catechism is that it is very personal, using the words "I," "me," and "my" in its answers. For example, listen to question 56: Question: What do you believe concerning "the forgiveness of sins?" Answer: I believe that God, because of Christ's atonement, will never hold against me any of my sins nor my sinful nature which I need to struggle against all my life. Rather, in his grace God grants me the righteousness of Christ to free me forever from judgment."

Other catechisms were written before the *Heidelberg Catechism*. Zacharias Ursinus, the twenty-eight year old theology professor who drew up its content borrowed theological ideas from one by John Calvin and the arrangement from Martin Luther's. Frederick's court preacher, twenty-six year old Caspar Olevianus, was involved in the final composition and editing of the work, which Heidelberg's theologians approved.

Later, someone divided the *Heidelberg Catechism* into fifty-two parts, one for each week of the year, so that it could be easily studied by the church. Pastors were expected to preach a sermon on the appropriate questions every Sunday afternoon.

Soon after it was written, the *Heidelberg Catechism* was translated into Dutch. The Dutch heartily endorsed it at four different synods. The Dutch Reformed Church is one of the strongest branches of the Reformed Church.

The influence of the *Heidelberg Catechism* did not end with the Dutch. On November 5th, 1647, when the Westminster Assembly of Divines presented their Shorter Catechism to the English House of Commons for approval, it was based on the famous Heidelberg text.²

The first question of the Heidelberg sets a tone that is carried forward throughout the catechism. "There is," writes Finlayson, "a personal tone that focuses the attention of the reader not just on Biblical doctrine, but also on the personal application of that doctrine."³ For the sake of convenience I have printed out all of the Scriptural references.

THE FIRST PART – OF THE MISERY OF MAN

1. Lord's Day

Question 1. What is thy only comfort in life and death?

Answer: That I with body and soul, both in life and death, (a) am not my own, (b) but belong unto my faithful Savior Jesus Christ; (c) who, with his precious blood, has fully satisfied for all my sins, (d) and delivered me from all the power of the devil; (e) and so preserves me (f) that without the will of my heavenly Father, not a hair can fall from my head; (g) yea, that all things must be subservient to my salvation, (h) and therefore, by his Holy Spirit, He also assures me of eternal life, (i) and makes me sincerely willing and ready, henceforth, to live unto him. (j)

(a) Rom. 14:7 For none of us liveth to himself, and no man dieth to himself. Rom. 14:8 For whether we live, we live unto the Lord; and whether we die, we die unto the Lord: whether we live therefore, or die, we are the Lord's. (b) 1 Cor. 6:19 What? Know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own? (c) 1 Cor. 3:23 And ye are Christ's; and Christ is God's. Tit. 2:14 Who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works. (d) 1 Pet. 1:18 Forasmuch as ye know that ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver and gold, from your vain conversation received by tradition from your fathers; 1 Pet. 1:19 But with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot: 1 John 1:7 But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin. 1 John 2:2 And he is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world. 1 John 2:12 I write unto you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you for his name's sake. (e) Heb. 2:14 Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same; that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; 1 John 3:8 He that committeth sin is of the devil; for the devil sinneth from the beginning. For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil. John 8:34 Jesus answered them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin. John 8:35 And the servant abideth not in the house for ever; be free indeed. (f) John 6:39 And this is the Father's will which hath sent me, that of all which he hath given me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up again at the last day. John 10:28 And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand. 2 Thess. 3:3 But the Lord is faithful, who shall stablish you, and keep you from evil. 1 Pet. 1:5 Who are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. (g) Matt. 10:29 Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? And one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father. Matt. 10:30 But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Matt. 10:31 Fear ye not therefore, ye are of more value than many sparrows. Luke 21:18 But there shall not a hair of your head perish. (h) Rom. 8:28 And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose. (i) 2 Cor. 1:20 For all the promises of God in him are yea, and in him Amen, unto the glory of God by us. 2 Cor. 1:21 Now he which stablisheth us with you in Christ, and hath anointed us, is God; 2 Cor. 1:22 Who hath also sealed us, and given the earnest of the Spirit in our hearts. 2 Cor. 5:5 Now he that hath wrought us for the selfsame thing is God, who also hath given unto us the earnest of the Spirit. Eph. 1:13 In whom ye also trusted, after that ye believed, ye were sealed with that holy Spirit of promise, Eph. 1:14 Which is the earnest of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, unto the praise of his glory. Rom. 8:16 The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God: (j) Rom. 8:14 For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God. 1 John 3:3 And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure.

OF HOW MANY PARTS DOES THIS COMFORT CONSIST?

This comfort consists of six parts:

1. *Our reconciliation* with God through Christ, so that we are no longer the enemies, but the sons of God; neither are we our own, but we belong to Christ (1 Cor. 7:23).
2. *The manner* of our reconciliation with God through the blood of Christ, that is, through his passion, death, and satisfaction for our sins. (1 Peter 1:18; 1 John 1:7).
3. *Deliverance* from the miseries of sin and death. Christ does not only reconcile us to God, but he also delivers us from the power of the devil; so that sin, death, and satan have no power over us. (Heb. 2:14; 1 John 3:8).

4. *The constant preservation* of our reconciliation, deliverance, and whatever other benefits Christ has once purchased for us. We are his property; therefore, he watches over us as his own, so that not so much as a hair can fall from our heads without the will of our heavenly Father. Our safety does not lie in our own hands, or strength; for if it did, we should lose it a thousand times every moment.
5. *The turning* of all our evils into good. The righteous are, indeed, afflicted in this life, yea they are put to death, and are as sheep for the slaughter; yet these things do not injure them, but rather contribute to their salvation, because God turns all things to their advantage, as it is said: “All things work together for good to them that love God.” (Rom. 8:27).
6. Our full persuasion and assurance of all these great benefits, and of eternal life. This assurance is obtained, in the first place, from the testimony of the Holy Spirit working in us true faith, and conversion, bearing witness with our spirits that we are the sons of God, and that these blessings truly pertain to us; because “he is the earnest of our inheritance;” and secondly, from the effects of true faith, which we perceive to be in us; such as true penitence, and a firm purpose to believe God and obey all his commandments; for we are assured of having true faith when we have an earnest desire of obeying God; and by faith we are persuaded of the love of God and eternal salvation. This is the foundation of all the other parts of this consolation which we have specified, and without which every other comfort is transient and unsatisfying amid the temptations of life. The substance of our comfort therefore is briefly this: – That we are Christ’s, and through him reconciled to the Father, that we may be beloved of him and saved, the Holy Ghost and eternal life being given unto us.⁴

CONCLUSION: “Three things we must know, the Catechism teaches us, know with the spiritual knowledge of faith: our sins and miseries, and the measure of them; the way of our deliverance; and the expression of our gratitude according to the Word and will of God. Do not misunderstand the intention of the Catechism here. It does not mean that we must first learn to know all about our sins and miseries in order, then, to come to the knowledge of our salvation; and, when the latter is finished, enter into the knowledge of the expression of our gratitude. The three things we must know do not successively replace one another; they are simultaneous. The Christian possesses this knowledge in its threefold fulness. Always he must know his sins and miseries; always he must know how he is delivered; and always he must know how he may express his thankfulness to God for such deliverance. They are three indispensable elements of the one knowledge. They are ‘the triple knowledge.’ And until the day of his death he must increase in this threefold knowledge. There is no end to it in this life. He never graduates. And the more he grows in true spiritual knowledge along the triple line of sin, deliverance, gratitude, the more he will approximate the high standard set up in the first question and answer of this Lord’s Day and be able to say triumphantly: ‘This is my only comfort in life and death, that I belong to Christ my Lord!’”⁵

ENDNOTES

¹ This is taken from the foreword to the Banner of Truth edition of *The Heidelberg Catechism* (2014) by William Vandoodewaard. I highly recommend that everyone in the church purchase a copy of this edition.

² Dan Graver, *Questions and Answers: The Heidelberg Catechism* (Christianity.com, May 2007).

³ Sandy Finlayson, “Heidelberg and Westminster: Two Reformed Catechisms” (*New Horizons Magazine*, Jan./Feb./March 2005).

⁴ This outline analysis is taken from *The Commentary of Dr. Zacharias Ursinus on The Heidelberg Catechism* (rpt. P & R, 1970), p. 18.

⁵ Herman Hoeksema, *The Triple Knowledge I* (Reformed Free Publishing, 1970), p. 50.