

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	The Heidelberg Catechism	Pastor/Teacher
Number:	2	Gary L.W. Johnson
Text:	Matthew 22:37-40 and Psalm 4:6-8	
Date:	August 24, 2014 a.m.	

How to Have True Comfort

Carl Trueman, who spoke at our 2014 Lloyd Jackson Lectures, has written an excellent book on the importance of creeds and catechisms. Regarding the Heidelberg, he notes, “Question 1 shows the glorious Reformation Protestant insight into the fact that assurance is to be the normal experience of every Christian believer and not simply the preserve of a few special saints who have been given extraordinary insight into their status before God, as was the medieval Catholic position.

“This is a perhaps one of the greatest Protestant insights of the Reformation. We live in an age where conversion to Roman Catholicism is not uncommon among those who have been brought up as evangelicals. There are many reasons for this: some speak of being attracted by the beauty of the liturgy in comparison with what is often seen as a casual and irreverent flippancy in evangelical services; others like the idea of historical continuity, of knowing where the church has been throughout history; still others find the authority structure to be attractive in an age of flux and uncertainty. Whatever the reasons, most Protestants would concede that Rome has certain attractions. Nevertheless, the one thing that every Protestant who converts to Rome loses is assurance of faith.

“Recently a student at Westminster Theological Seminary was telling me how he had once found himself on a plane, sitting next to a famous Cardinal. The two of them had a delightful conversation over the course of the flight. Finally the student asked the Cardinal if he was sure of his salvation; the Cardinal shook his head. ‘Nobody can be certain of that,’ he declared. The Cardinal (as one would expect) knew his theology. The answer was a good one from the perspective of Roman Catholic theology.

“The insight of the Reformation on assurance was key, theologically and pastorally. And, given that it is one thing that every convert to Roman Catholicism from Protestantism must lose, it is worth noting its priority in the Heidelberg Catechism. The answer is so beautifully phrased; and yet if one ceases to be Protestant, one must cease to claim HC 1 as one’s own. That is a very high price to pay. Speaking for myself, all of the liturgical beauty of Rome, all of the tradition, all of the clarity of the authority structure (and that clarity is often, I think, more in the eye of the beholder than the Church itself) cannot compensate for the loss of the knowledge that I know I have been purchased by the precious blood of Christ that conversion to Rome requires.”¹

THE FIRST PART – OF THE MISERY OF MAN

1. Lord’s Day

Question 2. How many things are necessary for thee to know, that thou, enjoying this comfort, mayest live and die happily?

Answer: Three; (a) the first, how great my sins and miseries are; (b) the second, how I may be delivered from all my sins and miseries; (c) the third, how I shall express my gratitude to God for such deliverance. (d)

(a) Matt. 11:28 Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Matt. 11:29 Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. Matt. 11:30 For my yoke is easy, and my burden light. Luke 24:46 And said

unto them, Thus it is written, and thus it behooved Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day: Luke 24:47 And that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. Luke 24:48 And ye are witnesses of these things. 1 Cor. 6:11 And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God. Tit. 3:3 For we ourselves also were sometimes foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving divers lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful, and hating one another. Tit. 3:4 But after that the kindness and love of God our Savior toward man appeared, Tit. 3:5 Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost; Tit. 3:6 Which he shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior; Tit. 3:7 That being justified by his grace, we should be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life. (b) John 9:41 Jesus said unto them, If ye were blind, ye should have no sin: but now ye say, We see; therefore your sin remaineth. John 15:22 If I had not come and spoken unto them, they had not had sin: but now they have no cloke for their sin. (c) John 17:3 And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent. Acts 4:12 Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved. Acts 10:43 To him (Jesus) give all the prophets witness, that through his name whosoever believeth in him shall receive remission of sins. (d) Eph. 5:8 For ye were sometimes darkness, but now are ye light in the Lord: walk as children of light: Eph. 5:9 (For the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness and righteousness and truth;) Eph. 5:10 Proving what is acceptable unto the Lord. Eph. 5:11 And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them. 1 Pet. 2:9 But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light: 1 Pet. 2:10 Which in time past were not a people, but are now the people of God: which had not obtained mercy, but now have obtained mercy. Rom. 6:1 What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? Rom. 6:2 God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein? Rom. 6:12 Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, that ye should obey it in the lusts thereof. Rom. 6:13 Neither yield ye your members as instruments of unrighteousness unto sin: but yield yourselves unto God, as those that are alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness unto God.

I. A knowledge of our *misery* is necessary for our comfort, not that it of itself administers any consolation, or is any part of it, (for of itself it rather alarms than comforts,) but it is necessary:

A. Because it excites in us the desire of deliverance, just as a knowledge of disease awakens a desire of medicine on the part of the sick. Where there is no knowledge of our misery, there is not deliverance sought, just as the man who is ignorant of his disease never inquires after the physician. Now if we do not desire deliverance, we do not seek it; and if we do not seek it we will never obtain it, because God gives it only to those who seek, and knock, as it is said – “To him that knocketh, it shall be opened.” “Ask, and it shall be given unto you.” “Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness.” “Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden.” “I dwell with him that is of a contrite and humble spirit.” (Matt. 7:6; 5:6; 11:28. Isaiah 57:15.) That now which is necessary for the purpose of exciting in us a desire of deliverance, is also necessary for our comfort. But a knowledge of our misery is necessary for the purpose of creating in us the desire of deliverance. Therefore it is necessary for our consolation; not, indeed, as being in its own nature the cause, but as a motive, without which we would not seek it; for in itself it terrifies, yet this terror is advantageous when it leads to the exercise of faith.

B. That we may be thankful to God for our deliverance. We should be ungrateful if we did not know the greatness of the evil, from which we have been delivered; because, in this

case, we could not correctly estimate the magnitude of the blessing, and so would not obtain deliverance, since this is granted only to such as are thankful.

C. Because without the knowledge of our sinfulness and misery, we cannot hear the gospel with profit; for unless, by the preaching of the law as touching sin and the wrath of God, a preparation be made for the proclamation of grace, a carnal security follows, and our comfort becomes unstable. Sure consolation cannot stand in connection with carnal security. Hence it is manifest that we must commence with the preaching of the law, after the example of the Prophets and Apostles, that men may thus be cast down from the conceit of their own righteousness, and may obtain a knowledge of themselves, and be led to true repentance. Unless this be done, men will become, through the preaching of grace, more careless and obstinate, and pearls will be cast before swine to be trodden under foot.

II. A knowledge of our *deliverance* is necessary for our comfort:

A. That we may not despair. A knowledge of our misery would lead us to despair, did not a way of deliverance present itself to us.

B. That we may desire this deliverance. An unknown good is not desired; because what we have no knowledge of, we cannot desire. If we be ignorant, therefore, of the benefit of our deliverance, we will not long after it, and of course will not obtain it. Yea, if it were even offered to us, or we were to fall upon it, we would not embrace it.

C. That it may comfort us. A good that is not known, cannot impart any comfort.

D. That we may not devise another method of deliverance, or embrace one invented by others, and thereby cast a reproach upon the name of God, and endanger our salvation.

E. That we may receive it by faith; but faith cannot be without knowledge. Deliverance is also obtained by faith alone.

F. That we may be thankful to God; for as we do not desire an unknown good, so we neither appreciate nor feel thankful for it. But the benefit of deliverance is not given to the ungrateful. God is pleased to confer it only upon those in whom it produces its proper effect, which is gratitude. For these reasons, a knowledge of our deliverance, what it is, in what manner and by whom it is effected, and bestowed, &c., is necessarily required, that we may enjoy true and solid comfort. This knowledge is obtained from the gospel, as heard, read, and apprehended by faith; because it alone promises deliverance to those that believe in Christ.

III. A knowledge of *gratitude* is necessary to our comfort:

A. Because God is pleased to grant deliverance only to the thankful. It is only in such that his purpose is realized, which is his glory and gratitude on our part. Gratitude is, therefore, the principal end, and design of our deliverance. “For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil.” “He hath adopted us to the praise of the glory of his grace.” (1 John 3:8. Eph. 1:4.)

B. That we may return such gratitude as is acceptable to God, who will not have us to be grateful under any other form than that which he has prescribed in his word. True gratitude is, therefore, not to be rendered according to our own notion, but is to be learned from the Word of God.

C. That we may know that whatever duties we perform towards God and our neighbor, are not meritorious, but are a declaration of our thankfulness; for that which we do from gratitude, we acknowledge we have not deserved.

D. That our faith and comfort may be increased; or, that by this gratitude, we may assure ourselves of our deliverance, as we are made acquainted with the causes of things from their effects. Those who are grateful, acknowledge and profess that they are certain of the good which they have received. We may learn what true gratitude is, in general, from the gospel, because it requires faith and repentance in order that we may be saved, as it is said, “Repent, and believe the gospel, for the kingdom of Heaven is at hand.” (Mark 1:15.)²

CONCLUSION: Man, left to his own unassisted reason, could never have ascertained the character or will of God, much less discovered the plan of salvation through Jesus Christ; but the faithful Saviour having undertaken to rescue his own from all the consequences of their sins, makes their instruction sure by the grace of his Holy Spirit. Holy men of old were moved by the Holy Spirit to write the books of the Old and New Testaments, which together constitute the Word of God, our only rule of faith and practice; and therefore all we know of religion we have been taught by the Holy Spirit. The Scriptures are, however, by themselves addressed to men or Christians (as the case may be) generally; and experience, nay, the Word itself, shows that no man applies the testimony of the revelation to his own case, until the same divine Agent who inspired the testimony moves the sinner’s heart to perceive himself addressed by it; but then discovering his guilt and danger, he also sees the sufficiency of atonement offered on his behalf, and trusts in Christ as his Saviour. Such personal faith – the appropriating of the Gospel to our own souls – is the effect of the Spirit’s testimony in our hearts corresponding to his testimony in the Scriptures, and constitutes our assurance of salvation, – by which salvation we mean, according to Scripture, the full accomplishment of the Saviour’s purpose of eternal love toward the sinner that believes on his name. Amidst all his failures and imperfections he discovers a new principle at work in his soul which can have been engendered there only by divine power. This is the testimony of the Spirit. The same Holy One who testifies in the Scriptures and in the hearts of sinners, testifies in the believer’s life, making him who was once a rebel now “sincerely willing and ready henceforth to live unto Christ.” Oh what a happiness, what a comfort it is, that we belong unto Christ, who not only has died for us, but by his Spirit lives in us, working through us his holy purpose! When we can claim this comfort, “Christ is formed in us the hope of glory.”

May God assist our farther studies by his Holy Spirit, that we, being convinced of sin and made to know the preciousness of Christ, may find our only comfort in his choice of us, and our choice of him as our Saviour, Master, and eternal Friend. Amen.³

ENDNOTES

¹ Carl Trueman, *The Creedal Imperative* (Crossway, 2012), p. 124.

² This outline analysis is adapted from *The Commentary of Dr. Zacharias Ursinus on The Heidelberg Catechism* (rpt. P & R, 1970), p. 21.

³ This section is adapted from George W. Bethune, *Guilt, Grace and Gratitude: Lectures on The Heidelberg Catechism I* (rpt. The Banner of Truth, 1997), pp. 24-27.