

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	The Heidelberg Catechism	Pastor/Teacher
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Moral Inability and Moral Obligation

THE FIRST PART – GUILT

2. Lord's Day

Question 5. Canst thou keep all these things perfectly?

Answer: In no wise; (a) for I am prone by nature to hate God and my neighbor. (b)

(a) Rom. 3:10 As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one: Rom. 3:20 Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin. Rom. 3:23 For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; 1 John 1:8 If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. 1 John 1:10 If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us. (b) Rom. 8:7 Because the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be. Eph. 2:3 Among whom also we all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others. 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. Gen. 6:5 And GOD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. Gen. 8:21 And the LORD smelled a sweet savor; and the LORD said in his heart, I will not again curse the ground any more for man's sake; for the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth; neither will I again smite any more every thing living, as I have done. Jer. 17:9 The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it? Rom. 7:23 But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members.

We noted that the language of the HC is carefully chosen. In Q. 1 we underscored the word *only* comfort. So here in Q. 5 note the word *perfectly*. “Canst thou keep all these things *perfectly*? That is: canst thou keep them without flaw or blunder, without ever being motivated to the slightest degree by anything else than the love of God? Dost thou wake up with that love of God in thy heart and mind in the morning, and dost thou go to sleep with it in the evening? Does it motivate thee in thy eating and drinking, in every thought of thy mind, in every desire of thy heart, in every word thou speakest, in every deed thou performest? Yes, it must be that or nothing. For this adverb ‘perfectly’ is not added in order to suggest that it is possible that you keep all these things imperfectly; but on the contrary, to emphasize the fact, that you must either keep them perfectly or cannot keep them at all. For it is a question of *love*, and that of the love of *God*. And love is a matter of the heart. Hence, here you cannot compromise; you must choose. It is ‘either – or,’ not ‘both – and.’ It is ‘Yes’ or ‘No,’ never ‘Yes’ and ‘No.’ And, what is more, here there is no possibility of neutrality. You cannot evade the issue. If your answer is ‘No,’ you say ‘No’ to the living God, to the Lord of all, and that means that you hate Him, and hate Him perfectly, with all you heart and mind and soul and strength. Thus the question must be put. What is your answer?

“The answer of the Christian, who stands on God’s side and in His light when he passes judgment upon himself, is absolute and uncompromising: ‘In no wise; for I am prone by nature to hate God and my neighbor.’ Every word here has its weight. ‘In no wise’: this is the direct reply to the question as to my *ability* to keep all things perfectly, i.e. to love God. Mark you well, it is a question of *ability*, of *capability*, not merely of *activity*. It is an answer to the question *Canst* thou? not to the totally different question *Dost* thou? The answer, therefore, means: *I cannot!* The Catechism, therefore, here teaches *total incapability* to love God. And that emphatically: ‘in no wise’! Keep all these things perfectly? Impossible! I could not even begin to keep them. And this impossibility is due to incapability. I have not the power to love God. And this incapability is not a physical defect, it is ethical, moral, spiritual. I cannot, I will not, I cannot will. I have not the light in my mind; I have not the inclination in my will; I have not the desire in my heart to love God and to keep all these things! Yes, such is the implication of the verdict the Christian passes upon himself. ‘Canst thou?’ ... ‘In no wise!’”¹

CONCLUSION: The noted 19th century Reformed theologian W.G.T. Shedd wrote: “The depravity or corruption of nature is total: Man is ‘wholly inclined to evil, and that continually’ (Westminster Larger Catechism 25); ‘God saw that every imagination of the thoughts of man was only evil continually’ (Gen. 6:5). There can be but a single dominant inclination in the will at one and the same time, though with it there may be remnants of a previously dominant inclination. Adam began a new sinful inclination. This expelled the prior holy inclination. He was therefore totally depraved, because there were no remainders of original righteousness left after apostasy, as there are remainders of original sin left after regeneration. This is proved by the fact that there is no struggle between sin and holiness in the natural man like that in the spiritual man. In the regenerate, ‘the flesh lusts against the spirit, and the spirit against the flesh’ (Gal. 5:17). Holiness and sin are in a conflict that causes the regenerate to ‘groan within themselves’ (Rom. 8:23). But there is no such conflict and groaning in the natural man. Apostasy was the fall of the human will, with no remnants of original righteousness. Regeneration is the recovery of the human will, with some remnants of original sin.

“Total depravity means the entire absence of holiness, not the highest intensity of sin. A totally depraved man is not as bad as he can be, but he has no holiness, that is, no supreme love of God. He worships and loves the creature rather than the Creator (Rom. 1:25).”²

ENDNOTES

¹ Herman Hoeksema, *The Triple Knowledge* I (Reformed Free Publishing Assoc., 1970), p. 69.

² W.G.T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology* (Third edition, ed. A.W. Gomes, P & R, 2003), p. 602.