

Our Only Comfort

52 Reflections on the Heidelberg Catechism

Neal D. Presa

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Foreword

*T*he word “catechism” does not typically make people break out in warm smiles. It sounds like a tedious exercise in learning the prescribed answers to old questions nobody really cares about. But this was not the intent of the writers of the Heidelberg Catechism. They were trying to do something very different—maintaining our holy conversation with the God who is passionate for us.

Along the way in the conversation the Catechism doesn’t just teach; more importantly it spiritually forms us by pressing questions that pierce the most protected corners of our hearts. And then it suggests the most thoughtful responses the church has found.

The Catechism’s rhythm of questions and responses, not answers, gives the reader a sense of being in dialogue with this One who is always abounding in grace, even when offering the law. Or it unfolds the depth of God’s mercy that is found in saying the Apostles’ Creed or the Lord’s Prayer. As one reads through the Catechism it soon becomes clear that the focus is on a God who really knows us, even our sin, but who has determined to redeem us in love. It is almost as if all the questions of the Catechism are really asking God, “Really? You still want to offer us the comfort of salvation?” And the response is always, “Yes, because that is how grace works.” This is a great conversation.

The architecture of the Heidelberg Catechism organizes this sacred conversation around fifty-two weeks. The expectation of its authors, Zacharias Ursinus and Caspar Olevianus, a scholar and a pastor, was not that it would be used to form another orthodoxy. Instead, their goal was to shape the souls of those who invoked it as a spiritual discipline through weekly worship. For over 450 years, it has done exactly that.

Dr. Neal Presa clearly understands this mission of the Heidelberg Catechism. His book has no interest in polemical arguing about the superiority

of Reformed theological convictions. Instead, like the Catechism itself, he is just whispering in the ear of anyone who is interested in looking into the deepest questions of life. This book could have been written only by a pastor who has paid attention to the lives of his parishioners, as well as his own, and who has a trained eye for the subtext of yearning we find in culture.

All good conversations take time to listen to everyone in the room. When you read this book you discover that you are in the room, and so is the Catechism, and so is the Holy Spirit who is using this holy conversation to bind you deeper into the Son's beloved relationship with the Father. So I encourage you to read this book slowly, perhaps in fifty-two increments, and allow the sacred conversation to continue in your own heart between the readings.

When theology is done well, it realizes that its true mission is to nurture our understanding of what it means to live in Christ. When pastoral ministry is done well, it has the exact same purpose. Thus, here we have an extraordinarily pastoral catechism that is being presented by an extraordinarily capable pastor, both with the same goal—guiding the reader deeper into the discovery of what it means to be fully alive in Christ.

Also, it is significant that Dr. Presa wrote this book after completing a two-year term in which he served as the Moderator of the 220th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). In this capacity he traveled more miles than even he knows around the world listening to Christians from many different traditions of our one common faith in Jesus Christ. This comes through in his writing. And perhaps it is one of the reasons he chose to write about the Heidelberg.

When Ursinus and Olevianus were asked by Frederick III to write the Catechism, it was because the people of Palentate, Germany, were torn between Lutheran and Reformed convictions. The original purpose of the Heidelberg was to create an affirmation of faith that could hold together Protestants with different theologies. It achieves this goal by its deep commitment to pastoral theology.

Dr. Presa is an ecumenical statesman who stands in the great Heidelberg tradition of finding a way to keep people of many diverse Christian traditions engaged in the same holy conversation with our only comfort in life and death. So it doesn't really matter what Christian tradition has formed you, or even if you have no tradition of faith, you will be blessed by following these reflections on what it means to belong to a faithful savior named Jesus Christ.

M. Craig Barnes
President, Princeton Theological Seminary

Introduction

*T*he Reformed theological tradition is a confessional one. We confess what we believe about God, ourselves, and the world. Such confession is written, taught, read, sung, prayed, and tweeted. The power of confession is that it anchors us to a common faith which belongs to a community of followers of Jesus Christ, a sojourning fellowship that seeks in every generation to be faithful to the self-giving, self-revealing triune God.

In 2013, Reformed churches celebrated the 450th anniversary of the Heidelberg Catechism. This theological treasure is arguably the most translated and the most used in the constellation of confessional documents that Reformed communities have developed over the five centuries since the sixteenth-century Reformation. It is a beloved catechism in that it succinctly teaches the Reformed faith within the framework of the ancient “rule of faith”: the Apostles’ Creed, the Ten Commandments, and the Lord’s Prayer. Its salutary benefit enriches our life and faith in apprenticing us to the gospel of Jesus Christ (the Creed); the ethics of God’s kingdom and the ways of God’s own character and heart (the Ten Commandments); and the language of love (the Lord’s Prayer). I have used it in my home and family, in personal devotions, and in corporate worship.

The Heidelberg Catechism (1563) was grouped into fifty-two Lord’s Day sections, signaling the intention of the Palatinate authors that this be used in weekly worship of the Church. When I had the privilege of serving as both the Chair of the PC(USA) General Assembly Special Committee on the Heidelberg Catechism and, subsequently, as Moderator of the 220th General Assembly (2012) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), I undertook the devotional practice of offering pastoral, theological reflections on the fifty-two sections through blog posts as a way to be a resource to congregations, pastors, and worship planners to use the Catechism in worship. This book is the

culmination of that project, with added prayers to accompany the particular theological themes of each catechetical section.

I am grateful for the diligent work of the Special Committee as we partnered with the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA) and the Reformed Church of America (RCA) in developing a common translation of the Catechism that is now shared among our three communions; this is a remarkable ecumenical feat.

The common translation that we in the PC(USA) will now have in our *Book of Confessions* also has updated scriptural references that were in the various 1563 German and Latin versions of the Catechism. (Scripture citations in **boldface** were not in the 1563 German edition but were added in the 1563 Latin edition. Citations in *italics* were in the German edition but were omitted from the Latin edition. Square brackets [] indicate the Special Committee's corrections of typographical errors in the 1563 texts and clarifications.) May these accompanying references deepen our engagement with both God's Word and the Catechism as we give careful consideration and prayerful study to the three main themes of the Catechism: guilt, grace, and gratitude.

My thanks go to my colleagues on the General Assembly Special Committee on the Heidelberg Catechism, our partners in the CRCNA and RCA, and the Office of the General Assembly. I am deeply grateful to Westminster John Knox Press for publishing this volume, most notably David Dobson, vice president and executive director of publishing, for accepting and guiding this project. Last and certainly not least, thanks to my wife, Grace, and sons, Daniel and Andrew; Grace was stalwart in reading these reflections and posting them on my blog post during our moderatorial journey.

My sons, Daniel and Andrew, have been patient with me on this project. I am continually delighted in their growth in the faith as God has guided them and our parenting. The Catechism was to apprentice a present-future generation in the faith. Every day I am thankful to God to teach them what it means to find their comfort, in life and in death, in body and in soul, that Jesus Christ is their faithful Savior and Lord. To them and for them, I dedicate this book.

Lord's Day 1

Questions and Answers 1–2

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

A. That I am not my own,¹
but belong—
body and soul,
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 the tyranny of the devil.⁵
He also watches over me in such a way⁶
that not a hair can fall from my head
without the will of my Father in heaven;⁷
in fact, all things must work together for my salvation.⁸

Because I belong to him,
Christ, by his Holy Spirit,
assures me of eternal life⁹
and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready
from now on to live for him.¹⁰

¹1 Cor. 6:19

²Rom. 14:8

³1 Cor. 3:23

⁴1 Pet. 1:18; 1 John 1:7; 2:2

⁵1 John 3:8

⁶John 6:39

⁷Matt. 10:30; Luke 21:18

⁸Rom. 8:28

⁹2 Cor. 1:22; 5:5; Eph. 1:14; Rom. 8:16

¹⁰Rom. 8:14

2 Lord's Day 1

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

A. Three things:¹

first, how great my sin and misery are;²

second, how I am set free from all my sins and misery;³

third, how I am to thank God for such deliverance.⁴

¹Luke 24:47; 1 Cor. 6:11; Titus 3:3

²**John 9:41**; John 15:[6–]7

³John 17:3

⁴Eph. 5:10

The Heart of the Matter

There's a popular theory that in times of wild economic consumption zombie movies and television shows make a comeback and in times of economic desperation vampires are the preferred genre. In both cases, there's a numbing effect on the soul, a bloodletting and a blood thirsting, the sucking away of life and vitality. One thing zombies and vampires don't have is a heart.

In his book *Waiting for Gospel*, Douglas John Hall cites the theologian Paul Tillich, who discussed the three combination anxieties that all human beings face: (1) fate, destiny, and where I will go when I die; (2) shame, condemnation; and (3) meaningfulness and purposefulness. Hall suggests that even as the gospel offers the antidote to the fears and anxieties of each and all of those categories, we as twenty-first-century people need the Good News of God to counter number 3. To put it in a question, it's not so much anxiety over "Where will I go when I die?" as it is more about "What is the point of life and living?" "What is the heart of the matter of our life?"

It is very possible to live our lives as the walking dead—eating, voting, teaching—but not truly and fully alive in God. St. Irenaeus once remarked, "The glory of God is man fully alive."

Yet, we can get stuck in the mire of what we call life, going from point A to point B, in pursuit of people, places, and things . . . going through the grind of work, family, social responsibility, with Church or faith as but one among many activities or venues or compartments of our lives. It's a life of the walking dead . . . without passion, without soul.

The Catechism in these first two sections speaks to us in comprehensive terms—body and soul, life and death, and everything in between. This is cradle to grave and the life thereafter. The triune God claims us as God's own; God has a right to. God has the right to insist, to intrude, to instill in us

the knowledge and love of God because apart from God we can do nothing and are nothing; the opposite is true, as Scriptures testify, in and with God, “we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). God knows us best, as our Maker, and when we go on our self-destructive ways, thinking life is about us, or we are about ourselves, God as our loving Father in heaven sees the hurt we inflict on our souls, the hurt we inflict on others, and puts a stop to it so that we may live more fully alive for what God has in store for us.

The Scripture passages appended to Q/A 1 are replete with language of belongingness, or possession . . . God possesses us, and because God possesses us, holds us, we forever belong to God. The Tempter, evil spirits, death itself, and every element that contradicts our life in God—all of this has no right to intrude on us. God saves us fully, finally, in Jesus Christ, with the seal of the Holy Spirit to enable and empower us to live in, with, and for God. God declares to all these powers, principalities—no! And to us, God says—yes! You belong to Me. I am yours, and you are Mine.

Eberhard Busch summarizes what is at stake in Q/A 2. We need this comfort because we are in misery. God gives us this comfort in Christ by redeeming us. This comfort has the effect of our commitment to live lives of gratitude to God.

The misery comes in living as the walking dead, a life apart from God, a life not in touch with God’s desire for our lives and the world; a life that breaks the heart of our heavenly Father for what we were created to be.

Luther and Ursinus compared us to a sick patient: we need to recognize our diseased state and the source of our medicine, and be given the desire for that medicine. In the recognition of the illness and the cure, and in the receiving of the antidote, we are filled with joy and thankfulness. This recognition we learn from the Ten Commandments as the Decalogue teaches us the heart of God. The medicinal source we learn from the Creed, which summarizes the Good News of the triune God, the One who is the way, the truth, and the life. The Lord’s Prayer, which Jesus Christ joins us in praying to the Father and which the Spirit of Christ enables us to pray, keeps our lives continually pulsing after the heartbeat of God.

Prayer

Lord, You delight in me through Your Son, Jesus Christ. Anchor me to Your heart, that I may always delight in Your will and in Your ways. In body and in soul, in life and in death, I belong to You. For that, I am grateful. Amen.