



Thoughts from the Bible and Books Devotions from The Heidelberg Catechism

University Reformed Church

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The Heidelberg Catechism

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

A. That I am not my own, but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood, and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil. He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven: in fact, all things must work together for my salvation. Because I belong to him, Christ, by his Holy Spirit, assures me of eternal life and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.

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; second, how I am set free from all my sins and misery; third, how I am to thank God for such deliverance.

This first question is easily the most famous in the Catechism. It may be the only part of the catechism most Christians (even reformed ones) ever hear. But I suppose, if you get to hear just one, this is a pretty good one to get.

The only catechism question as well known as this one is the first question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism: “What is the chief end of man? To glorify God and enjoy him forever.” I’ve heard the Heidelberg criticized for beginning with man (what is *my* only comfort) instead of beginning with the glory of God like Westminster. But if we want to be picky, Westminster can be criticized for starting with what we ought to do rather than with what Christ has done for us, like the Heidelberg. In truth, both catechisms start in appropriate places. Heidelberg starts with grace. Westminster starts with glory. We’d be hard pressed to think of two better words to describe the theme of biblical revelation.

Heidelberg’s first question is so striking because of the word “only.” If it asked “what comforts” you, that would be a polite but underwhelming question. I’m comforted by sleep, chocolate chip cookies, a good book, and the soundtrack from *The Mission*. But when the Catechism asks “what is your *only* com-

fort” it is getting at something deeper. “Comfort” translates the German word *trost* which was, in turn, rendered *consolatio* in the first official Latin version. *Trost* is related to the English word “trust” and has the root meaning of “certainty” or “protection.” Heidelberg is asking, “What is your solace in life? What is your only real security?”

Ursinus, the chief architect of the Catechism, defined comfort as “that which results from a certain process of reasoning, in which we oppose something good to something evil, that by a proper consideration of this good, we may mitigate our grief, and patiently endure the evil” (Commentary, 17-18). In other words, comfort puts before us a greater joy to outweigh present and anticipated sufferings. Heidelberg’s first question not only sets the theme for the whole Catechism (see Q/A 2, 52, 53, 57, 58), it also poses the most important question we will ever face. What enables you to endure life and face death unafraid? Is it that you read your Bible every day? That you attend church every Sunday? That you give to the poor? That you have a cushy retirement saved up? That you haven’t committed any of the big sins in life?

We live in a world where we expect to find comfort in possessions, pride, power, and position. But

the Catechism teaches us that our only true comfort comes from the fact that we don't even belong to ourselves. How counter-cultural and counter-intuitive is this!—we can endure suffering and disappointment in life and face death and the life to come without fear of judgment not because of what we've done or what we own or who we are, but because of what we do not possess, namely, our own selves. Rather, our whole self—body and soul—belongs to Jesus Christ the Faithful One.

Heidelberg's emphasis on belonging to Christ probably comes from John Calvin. Some people have the impression that John Calvin was a rigid, dogmatician who dryly analyzed theology like it was some math problem to be solved. But listen to the passionate beat of Calvin's God-entranced heart in this passage, which finds an echo in the Heidelberg Catechism: "We are not our own: let not our reason nor our will, therefore, sway our plans and deeds. We are not our own: let us therefore not set it as our goal to seek what is expedient for us according to the flesh. We are not our own: in so far as we can, let us therefore forget ourselves and all that is ours. Conversely, we are God's: let us therefore live for him and die for him. We are God's: let his wisdom and will therefore rule all our actions. We are God's: let all the parts of our life accordingly strive toward him as our only lawful goal" (Inst. III.vii.1). The first question of the Catechism shapes our whole existence. The first thing we need to know as a Christian is that we belong to Jesus and not ourselves.

The Catechism does not stop at simply stating that Christ is our comfort. It gives six reasons why belonging to Christ affords such security, consolation, and protection—the first two reasons explaining what Christ has done for us, the last four explaining what he is currently doing. (1) Jesus paid for all our sins. (2) Jesus has set us free from bondage to Satan. (3) Christ watches over us with the most detailed care. (4) He works all things together for our salvation. (5) Christ, by his Holy Spirit gives us confidence that we will live forever. (6) Christ, by his Spirit, does what we could not do for ourselves; he makes us willing and ready to live for him.

Question 2 doesn't get the airtime that Question 1 does. But it is just as important. It doesn't

help much to know all about comfort and joy if we don't know what is required to live and die in this comfort and joy. The good news of Answer 1 is for those who belong to Jesus. And belonging to Jesus means knowing three things: guilt, grace, and gratitude. The rest of the Catechism will follow this three-fold outline. First we understand our sin. Then we understand salvation. And finally we understand how we are sanctified to serve.

All "three things" are necessary. If we don't know about our sin, we will be too confident in our abilities to do right and make the world a better place. Plus, we will ignore our most fundamental problem, which is not lack of education, or lack of opportunity, or lack of resources (though these are problems too), but sin and its attendant misery. But if we don't know how we are set free from this sin and misery, we will despair and lose occasion to give glory to the God of grace. And if we don't know how to thank God for such deliverance, we will live in a self-centered, self-referential bubble, which is not why God saved us from our sin and misery in the first place. If Christians would hold to all "three things" and not just one or two, we would be saved from a lot of poor theology and bad ideas.

Let me make one final point in closing. Don't miss the underlying assumption in these first two questions: we are *meant* to live and die in joy. That so few Christians do is a testimony to how hard life can be and how little we understand and meditate on what it means to belong to Christ. Recall Ursinus' definition of comfort. Comfort does not mean Christ makes all the bad things in life go away. Comfort is the result of putting something good as opposite something bad, so that our hurts and struggles are mitigated, and, in a real way, superceded with the joy we experience by virtue of union with Christ. When we think of living and dying in comfort, we imagine lazy-boys, back rubs, and all the food you can eat (with none of the pounds of course). But the Catechism has in mind a different kind of comfort, one that is deeper, higher, richer, and sweeter. We find this comfort by admitting our sin, instead of excusing it; by trusting in Another instead of ourselves; and by living to give thanks instead of being thanked.

Written by: Pastor Kevin DeYoung