



Thoughts from the Bible and Books Devotions from The Heidelberg Catechism

University Reformed Church

4930 S. Hagadorn Rd., E. Lansing, MI 48823 - 517.351.6810

Lord's Day 3 - January 20, 2008

6 **Q.** *Did God create people so wicked and perverse?*

A. No. God created them good and in his own image, that is, in true righteousness and holiness, so that they might truly know God their creator, love him with all their heart, and live with him in eternal happiness for his praise and glory.

7 **Q.** *Then where does this corrupt human nature come from?*

A. From the fall and disobedience of our first parents, Adam and Eve, in Paradise. This fall has so poisoned our nature that we are born sinners—corrupt from conception on.

8 **Q.** *But are we so corrupt that we are totally unable to do any good and inclined toward all evil?*

A. Yes, unless we are born again, by the Spirit of God.

In Lord's Day 2 we read about our inability to perfectly obey the law of God. God lays out wonderful commands for us in both Testaments, but we don't obey them. Worse yet, our tendency, says the Catechism, is not to love the Lord our God with all our heart and love our neighbor as ourselves, but to hate God and neighbor.

This raises an important question: Why are we like this? Is this how God made us—petty, proud, and perverse? The answer, of course, is "no." God made us in his image. Theologians say this image has a structural and functional aspect. Or to put it more simply, being made in God's image means we look like God and act like God.

Sometimes we hear people say "Well, isn't she the spitting image of her mother." I'm not sure what spitting has to do with it, but most of us have heard the saying before. It means, "She looks and act just like her mother. Anyone can tell that one came from and belongs to the other." In the same way, we were created to be the spitting image of God. This doesn't mean God has a body and is about six foot three with blue eyes. It means that Adam and Eve were created to have the character of God and live on earth as God's representatives.

Structurally, we were meant to reflect the character of God, displaying true righteousness and holiness (as the Catechism puts it). God made humans with a unique capacity for beauty, creativity, morality, and communication that makes us like God. We are more than a mass of molecules. We are more than the sum of blood, bones, tissues, organs, and skin. We are not super evolved monkeys. Adam and Eve were unique in all the world—the jewel of God's good creation, made just a little lower than the angels, crowned with glory and honor (Psalm 8:5).

Functionally, we act as image-bearers in three different spheres. (1) We relate to *nature* as the stewards of God's creation. (2) We relate to *each other*, treating people with dignity, both because God is good (and we ought to reflect that goodness) and because our neighbors are made in his image (worthy of honor). (3) We relate to *God* as his image-bearers. Of all his creatures, we are unique in that we can know God, hear from God, communicate with God, and have union with God. This is not true of a giraffe or a beetle or a morning dove. We are more important, more intelligent, and more magnificent than plants, animals, mountains, and microbes, be-

cause we are unique among God's creation. We have souls. We were created with a purpose. Our lives are not accidents. We were made to know God and look like God. That's how things were in the beginning.

But all of this has changed. Let's go back to the Garden of Eden. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil was a probationary tree. It was there to test Adam. "Do this and live," God said. "Disobey and die." Adam disobeyed, so he died...and so we die, and paradise died. As a result of the fall, shame enters the world—Adam and Eve realize they are naked (3:7). Fear enters the world—Adam and Eve hide from God (3:10). Blame enters the world—the man blames God for giving him the woman, and the woman blames the serpent for deceiving her (3:11-13). Pain enters the world (3:16). Relationships break down (3:16). Just making it in life will be a chore (3:17). Because of Adam's sin, God curses the serpent, curses the woman, curses the man, and curses the ground. So serpents slither, women have pain in childbirth, men are frustrated by work, and the earth produces thorns and thistles. All of creation, in other words, is subjected to futility, so that creation itself now eagerly awaits freedom from its bondage to decay (Rom. 8:20-25).

Moreover, because of Adam's sin, human nature is polluted. That's the point of Q/A 7. Each one of us has inherited from Adam a sinful nature, a disposition to do and think and feel what is wrong. J.C. Ryle, the Anglican bishop from the 19th century, said we are like smashed up temples. There is still a trace of original splendor as creatures made in the image of God, but the temple that was once glorious now has windows broken and columns crumbling and doorways smashed in. We are not what we once were.

The Catechism makes clear that we are not just imitators of our first parents, sinning like Adam and Eve. We are born with a warped nature, tainted with an inherent and inherited corruption from conception on. We absolutely must get this right if we are to make sense of the Catechism and Christianity. Our fundamental problem is not bad parents, bad schools, bad friends, or bad circumstances. Our fundamental problem is a bad heart. And every single one of us is born into the world with it.

In Question 8, Heidelberg pushes the question even further. "Alright, alright," you may be saying, "I am a bad person. I make mistakes. I'm not per-

fect. I agree. But I'm not *that* bad." Not so fast, says the Catechism. We are not just flawed. We are, to use the theological terminology, totally depraved. This doesn't mean we are as bad as we possibly could be. This doesn't even mean unregenerate people are incapable of morally outstanding acts. Total depraved means we are bad through and through (in head and heart and will) and unable to do anything truly righteous apart from the work of God. The Westminster Confession (XVI.7) explains it well: "Works done by unregenerate men, although for the matter of them they may be things which God commands; and of good use both to themselves and others: yet, because they proceed not from an heart purified by faith, nor are done in a right manner, according to the Word; nor to a right end, the glory of God, they are therefore sinful, and cannot please God..." The point is: we are inclined toward evil (Gen. 6:5). All of us like sheep have gone astray (Isa. 53:6). Even our righteous deeds are as filthy rags before the Lord (Isa. 64:6).

That's a lot of bad news, even for a section that is supposed to be all about misery. But thankfully the Catechism gives a glimmer of hope that is to come later on. We are unable to do good and bent toward evil, *unless* we are born again by the Spirit of God. Unfortunately, the phrase "born again" has become just another socio-political category. We have forgotten where it comes from. Jesus, borrowing from the prophet Ezekiel, is the one who first used the phrase. "You must be born again," he told Nicodemus (John 3:7). We need to tell people Jesus' commands to love, to forgive, to pray, to be humble, and on and on. We must teach the world to obey these commands (Matt. 28:19-20). But we must not forget the fountainhead command from which the river of obedience flows. Trying to live a Jesus life won't help us get into heaven and it will only discourage us over the long haul if we are not born again. This is where well-meaning socially minded Christians sometimes get off-track. They want the world to live like Jesus, but they forget that we can't live like Jesus unless the Spirit of Jesus first changes us.

We must be given a new heart. We must be regenerated. We must be converted. We must be changed. The Christian life—the life of faith in God, hope in Christ, and love for others—necessitates, first of all, a life that has been given a supernatural new start by the Holy Spirit. We must be born again.

- Written by Kevin DeYoung