



Thoughts from the Bible and Books *Devotions from The Heidelberg Catechism*

University Reformed Church

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Lord's Day 5 - February 3, 2008

- 12 **Q.** *According to God's righteous judgment we deserve punishment both in this world and forever after: how then can we escape punishment and return to God's favor?*
A. God requires that his justice be satisfied. Therefore the claims of his justice must be paid in full, either by ourselves or another.
- 13 **Q.** *Can we pay this debt ourselves?*
A. Certainly not. Actually we increase our guilt everyday.
- 14 **Q.** *Can another creature—any at all—pay this debt for us?*
A. No. To begin with, God will not punish another creature for what a human is guilty of. Besides, no mere creature can bear the weight of God's eternal anger against sin and release others from it.
- 15 **Q.** *What kind of mediator and deliverer should we look for then?*
A. One who is truly human and truly righteous, yet more powerful than all creatures, that is, one who is also true God.

Any good church will try to hold in tension the “now” and “later” of the Bible. Christianity tells us how to live fruitfully in this life *and* how we can live forever in the life to come. Jesus came that we might have abundant life (John 10:10) and eternal life (10:28). At times the Church has only thought of the afterlife—helping people set sail for the celestial shore and getting their heavenly mansions well-furnished, all the while making Christianity irrelevant for personal and cultural struggles. At other times the Church has only thought of this life—helping people shine up their marriages and eradicate global hunger, all the while making Christianity irrelevant for the all the imperfect souls not named Bono who are unable to travel the world ten times over, not to mention for the sick and dying who have little life yet to live.

The Heidelberg Catechism rightly focuses our attention on the now and the later, stirring us to embrace Jesus Christ as our only comfort in life *and* in death. The last third of the Catechism explains how we can live fruitful, Spirit-led, Christ-honoring lives in grateful response to God's grace. The middle and longest section of the Catechism (beginning on this Lord's Day) explains what the grace of God entails—describing who delivered us and how the deliverance was accomplished. As a result

of this structural organization, Part II of the Catechism deals more with the “later” and Part III more with the “now.” Of course, this is to simplify things greatly, because the whole Catechism is mingled with thoughts on living here and living eternally. But in general, the emphases are there.

Although the word is not mentioned, Lord's Day 5 is about hell. Many Christians today would prefer not to think about hell. They ignore it, deny it, or practice a studied agnosticism about the subject. Many of us are squeamish about God's wrath and reticent to share a gospel message that has to do with salvation from coming judgment. Certainly, we need balance. The implications of the gospel ought to lead to love of God and good for the world. But too often, the gospel is explained first of all as a message about selfless love, service, and dying for others. True, that is the heart of the gospel, but the selfless love, service, and dying for others is what we proclaim about Christ! Before we talk about rescuing the planet (reclaiming America for Christ on the right, and joining the One campaign on the left), we need to hear how Christ came to rescue sinners.

From what I've seen and read, the interest in missions among young people (outside our church) is

trending away from saving souls and toward saving the world. The interest is too often social to the exclusion of spiritual. Those who deal with the “spiritual,” must not ignore the “social,” and those who engage the “social” must fully embrace the “spiritual.” What we don’t want are Christians who argue that the stuff of our evangelistic tracts—“God’s grace, God’s forgiveness...the free gift of salvation”—is, at best, “only a footnote to a gospel that is much richer, grander, and more alive, a gospel that calls you to become a disciple and to disciple others, in authentic community, for the good of the world.” This is an actual quote from a well-known Christian author. His sentiments are sad and shocking. Salvation and forgiveness only a footnote to the gospel? What could be more important than escaping diving punishment and returning to God’s favor? Unless, of course, he doesn’t believe that we should fear him who can throw body and soul into hell? (Matt. 10:28)

The Catechism helps us here by re-orienting us to the crisis of the human condition: God is not for us, but against us. God’s wrath cannot be wished away from the pages of Scripture. Even in passages like Matthew 25 where Jesus commands us to feed and clothe the least of our brothers, he also warns against being shut out of the coming wedding feast (10), being cast into the outer darkness (30), and going away into eternal punishment (46). With sober gravity we must confess that hell is real and people will go there.

That’s the starting place in Lord’s Day 5. God’s justice means that we deserve punishment now and later. It is impossible for God to lie. It is impossible for him to change. And it is impossible for him to violate his own justice. He cannot let lawbreakers go free with the wave of his hand in some act of tolerance or inclusivity. Sin must be atoned for and sinners must be punished.

There are two options, then, if God is to be true to himself and maintain justice in the universe. We can pay this debt or someone else can pay it for us. Question and Answer 13 quickly disposes of the first option. We can’t do enough to atone for our sins, both because we are finite and cannot pay for our offense against an infinite God and because each day we sin more and see our guilt increase. “You load sixteen tons and what do you get?” asks the old folk song. “Another day older and deeper in debt.” The

same is true in our spiritual lives. We can’t pay the debt we owe to God. The more we try to dig ourselves out, the deeper our hole gets.

What about another creature, asks Question 14. Can something else in the created universe—anything at all—pay our debt for us? The answer again is no. First of all, God is fair and will not punish another creature for human sin. To paraphrase Hebrews 2:14-18: only flesh and blood can save flesh and blood; to put it another way, it takes a member of the family to save the family. Second, another creature paying our debt would have the same problem as any human—insufficient funds. The weight of God’s eternal anger is more than any animal, saint, or angel can bear.

As you can see, Heidelberg’s logic is marching us in a straight line to Christ. Our Deliver is not named until Lord’s Day 5, but that’s the only option Question 15 leaves on the table. If God will not punish a non-human for human sin, and yet, a human cannot bear the weight of divine wrath, the only one who can deliver us is a being who is both human and divine. We need a mediator who can lay a hand on us both (Job 9:33). We need a righteous Man to save fallen men and a divine Man to bear the curse of God.

It took the Church a few centuries of heresies to safeguard this biblical truth from error. Almost all the early heresies dealt somehow with the person of Christ, either denying his full deity (Arianism), or his full manhood (Docetism), or confusing the two (Eutychianism), or splitting the two (Nestorianism). As attractive as the compromise solutions seemed at the time, nothing other than full-throated orthodoxy would do, because nothing other than a God-Man can save men from God. We need a bridge that goes far enough in both directions, spanning the gulf that exists between a holy God and a rebellious people. We need a Mediator who is “God and human” yet “not two, but one” (Athanasian Creed).

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