



Thoughts from the Bible and Books Devotions from The Heidelberg Catechism

University Reformed Church

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Lord's Day 6 - February 10, 2008

The Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 6

- 16 **Q.** *Why must he be truly human and truly righteous?*
A. God's justice demands that human nature, which has sinned, must pay for its sin; but a sinner could never pay for others.
- 17 **Q.** *Why must he also be true God?*
A. So that, by the power of his divinity, he might bear the weight of God's anger in his humanity and earn for us and restore to us righteousness and life.
- 18 **Q.** *And who is this mediator—true God and at the same time truly human and truly righteous?*
A. Our Lord Jesus Christ, who was given us to set us completely free and to make us right with God.
- 19 **Q.** *How do you come to know this?*
A. The holy gospel tells me. God himself began to reveal the gospel already in Paradise; later, he proclaimed it by the holy patriarchs and prophets, and portrayed it by the sacrifices and other ceremonies of the law; finally he fulfilled it through his own dear Son.

I'm going to take most of this devotional to relate a story (actually a letter that came out of the story), but first let's talk definitions. There are several theological words used to describe Christ's work on the cross. *Expiation* means that Christ's death removed our sin and guilt (Q/A 16). *Redemption* means Christ's death ransomed us from the curse of the law and the punishment and power of sin (Q/A 18). *Reconciliation* means Christ's death restored our relationship with God (Q/A 18). *Propitiation* means Christ's death appeased or placated the wrath of God (Q/A 17). All four of these terms (and there are others) capture an essential and biblical aspect of the cross. The best news about Jesus is that through him we are forgiven of our sins, set free from the law, made right with God, and can stand confident before our Creator.

This is what is announced to us in the *gospel* (Q/A 19). The gospel is not a summons to kingdom living or a message about what we can do for God or a description of our efforts at cultural transformation. The gospel, according to Paul's summary in 1 Corinthians 15, is the good news that Jesus Christ died for our sins and rose again on the third day. I mention all this vocabulary because Lord's Day 6 leads us to it, and because the ideas safeguarded by these words are often denied, minimized, or unduly sanitized. Which leads me to my story.

It would be long and confusing to tell the whole story, but earlier this fall I found myself writing a long letter to an anonymous RCA church leader. I was writing at the request of a mutual contact both of us know. I still don't know to whom I was responding, except that he is a critic of RCA Integrity (an evangelical renewal group in our denomination that I lead), and (I'm told) a well-known RCA figure that I would be familiar with. Apparently, this person took issue with our Covenant (www.integrityrca.org) and issued a critique which proved influential with some of the higher ups in the denomination. Although I was very reluctant to respond to an anonymous critique, our mutual contact convinced me that I could do some good for our cause if I responded.

The letter of critique was intelligent and asked some good questions. There were also some points of major disagreement. The most surprising and disappointing sentence I read in the anonymous critique was this one: "*I actually find no place in Scripture itself that speaks of the wrath of God being directed upon Jesus at the cross.*"

My response, which relates directly to the atonement, the gospel, and Lord's Day 6, is what follows:

"This is a shocking statement [the one in italics above]. I've read it over a dozen times to make sure I understand it correctly. If the sentence is correct, then most of our

churches are proclaiming something other than the gospel. Is not the message preached in hundreds of our churches simply this: God created us in his image; because of the fall we are by nature children of wrath; left to our own we cannot stand before a holy God; we deserve to be punished for offending this God; but in love God sent his Son to bear our sins and face the penalty we deserved; God's wrath was poured out on Jesus and Jesus' righteousness is imputed to us by faith—is this not the gospel? Of course, there's more to be said about the Christian story, but certainly not less than this. I can't help but be saddened that someone in the RCA would deny such a central tenet of the gospel, one that is reiterated numerous times in our confessions.

"I can find numerous places in Scripture where we are taught, explicitly or implicitly, that the wrath of God was directed upon Jesus at the cross. One thinks of the Passover in Exodus 12. Penal Substitution lies at the heart of the Passover—God poured out his wrath on the slain lamb instead of his people. Surely, this line of thinking is present in John's gospel where John the Baptist confesses about Jesus "The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). I also see the wrath of God poured out on Jesus prefigured in the Day of Atonement ritual of Leviticus 16. In addition, Isaiah 53 poignantly touches on the same theme. Jesus, as the Suffering Servant was pierced for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities. It was the Lord's will to crush him, pouring out his wrath on his Servant.

"Similarly, Mark 10:45 teaches that Jesus gave his life as a ransom for many. This ransom was paid, not to Satan as some medieval theologians wrongly taught, but to God the Father as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to him (Eph. 5:2). In Mark 10:38 Jesus asked his disciples "Can you drink the cup I drink?" And in Gethsemane, Jesus pleaded with his Father "take this cup from me" (Mark 14:36). Surely Jesus was thinking of passages like Psalm 75:8; Isaiah 51:17; Jeremiah 25:15-16, Ezekiel 23:32-34, and Habakkuk 2:16, all of which speak of drinking the cup of God's wrath. John 3:14-18 teaches that God sent his Son to be lifted up on the cross (like the snake lifted up in the wilderness which saved people from God's judgment) so that the wrath of God would not remain on those who believe. Romans 3:21-26 teaches that Christ was set forth as a sacrifice of atonement (literally "propitiation"; see Leon Morris' classis work *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* which establishes that *hilasterion* refers to propitiation, contra C.H. Dodd) turning aside God's wrath by suffering in our place as our substitute. Romans 5:8-9 argues that Christ died for us while we were God's enemies, so that we might be saved

by him from the wrath of God. Galatians 3:13 says Christ became a curse for us, bearing the penalty we deserved as law breakers. 1 John 4:10 teaches that God sent his Son to be a propitiation for our sins (see also 1 John 2:2; Hebrews 2:17). And on and on.

"Moreover, our confessions are crystal clear on this point. This is not a minor detail in our confessions (like whether Hebrews is one of Paul's epistles or not), but a central theme. Look at the logic of the Heidelberg Catechism in Q/A 12-18. According to God's righteous judgment we deserve punishment both in this world and forever after: how then can we escape this punishment? God's justice must be satisfied by ourselves or another (Q/A 12). Can we pay this debt? No (Q/A 13). Can another creature pay this debt? No mere creature can bear the weight of God's eternal anger against sin (Q/A 14). What kind of mediator should we look for? One who is truly human and truly righteous, that is one who is also truly God (Q/A 15). Why must he be truly human and truly righteous? God's justice demands that human nature pay for sin (Q/A 16). Why must he also be God? "So that, by the power of his divinity, he might bear the weight of God's anger in his humanity and earn for us and restore us to righteousness and life" (Q/A 17). Who is this mediator? "Our Lord Jesus Christ, who was given us to set us completely free and to make us right with God." Heidelberg teaches unequivocally that God directed his wrath on Christ at the cross. Likewise, Q/A 37 says "that during his whole life on earth, but especially at the end, Christ sustained in body and soul the anger of God against the sin of the whole human race." Belgic Confession Article 21 teaches that Christ "presented himself in our name before his Father, to appease his wrath with full satisfaction by offering himself on the tree of the cross..." The teaching could not be any clearer. God directed his wrath against humanity on Jesus at the cross. I don't see how anyone can affirm the Standards with integrity—even with the slippery language of historic and faithful witnesses—and deny that God poured out his wrath on his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ."

I'm probably out of space already, but let me add three quick comments in closing. (1) Never compromise on the cross. (2) Never stop meditating on the cross. (3) Never stop reading on the cross. I suggest *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* by John Murray, *The Cross of Christ* by John Stott, *Pierced for Our Transgressions* by Steve Jeffrey, Michael Ovey, and Andrew Sach, and the Gospels according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

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