



Thoughts from the Bible and Books Devotions from The Heidelberg Catechism

University Reformed Church

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Lord's Day 9 - March 02, 2008

24 **Q.** *What do you believe when you say, "I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth"?*

A. That the eternal Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who out of nothing created heaven and earth and everything in them, who still upholds and rules them by his eternal counsel and providence, is my God and Father because of Christ his Son. I trust him so much that I do not doubt he will provide whatever I need for body and soul, and he will turn to my good whatever adversity he sends me in this sad world. He is able to do this because he is almighty God; he desires to do this because he is a faithful Father.

Besides being ancient, ecumenical (in the good sense), and biblical, the Apostles' Creed is catchy. I'm not sure if you can dance to it (haven't tried), but it does have a cadence that makes congregational recitation intuitively doable. The first line rolls off the tongue nicely, especially if you've grown up in church or your parents made you memorize it (like my oldest has to). "I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth" has a certain ring to it, don't you think?

But behind the familiar language and rhythm there are a number of important theological points to be made. I count at least seven the Catechism draws from this first line of the Creed.

First, our heavenly Father is the *eternal* Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. There never was when Christ was not (contra Arianism), and there never was when the Father was not a father to the Son and the Son a son to the Father. God has always been the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, even before the incarnation. Fatherhood is not something that happened to God or he decided to try on one day. It isn't like fatherhood in a human context where every father became one at a point in time, previous to which he was not a father. For God the Father, fatherhood is who he is and always has been. The single characteristic of fatherhood defines and describes him in a way that is essential, irreducible, and eternal.

Second, God created the world *ex nihilo*, which is Latin for "out of nothing." This doesn't mean God didn't shape the universe after he called into existence—it was initially formless and void (Gen. 1:2). Creation *ex nihilo* means in the beginning there was God and nothing else. "By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible" (Heb. 11:3). No stars, no sky, no light, no sun, no creatures, no water, no dust, nothing. It's almost impossible to comprehend. We can fathom an uninhabited world, even a universe filled with an endless expanse of darkness, but prior to Genesis 1:1 there wasn't even a dark sky. There was nothing but nothingness. The only something was an invisible, spiritual, eternal God. And after countless eons of inter-Trinitarian bliss, God decided he would make something. He simply commanded and it came forth, even though there was no "it" to come forth prior to God's voice making it so (Ps. 33:6). And so, God made everything—the heavens and the earth—all out of nothing.

Third, the same God who created the universe out of nothing, still upholds and rules his creation by his counsel and providence. If the Christian belief in creation *ex nihilo* rules out dualism (God and matter have always existed side by side) and pantheism (God is

the universe and the universe is God), then our belief in providence rules out deism. Which is to say, God did not create the world like some cosmic watchmaker, winding it up and then leaving it to tick-tock by itself. Instead, as we'll see in Lord's Day 10, God still rules over heaven and earth, superintending and guiding them by his fatherly hand.

Fourth, this Creator of the universe is my God and Father. Most kids go through a phase where they brag about their dads. "My dad can throw a football about a mile!" "So, my dad makes like a million trillion dollars!" "Well, my dad reads a lot of books!" We've all heard these boasts (except for the last one, but my boys need something to say too). Consider the boast you could make if your Father made all the miles a football could ever travel, and owned all the money in every bank account in the world, and knew every fact in every book that's been written or ever will be written. That would be one great dad. And that's your Father in heaven. We have often heard that God is our Father, which is true, but we seldom remember that the opposite is just as true: your Father is God.

Fifth, God is my Father because of Christ his Son. The old liberal credo made much of "the universal fatherhood of God." But as nice as it sounds, God is not the Father of all. He is God over all (even though many do not worship him), and Lord over all (though many do not submit to him), and in one sense he may be called the Father of all in that all people owe their existence to God. But in the deeper sense of the title—the way Jesus used it—God is not the Father of all. He is only Father to those who have Christ for their brother (Heb. 2:10-17). We are children of God, not by right of human birth, but by virtue of divine adoption. It is those who receive Jesus and believe in his name who are given the right to be called children of God, children born not of the flesh, but of God (John 1:12). This may sound harsh to those outside the Christian faith, but if the Bible really taught "the universal fatherhood of God" where would the good news be in that? Let's see, Jesus came and died so you could be right with God and know him as your loving heavenly Father, which of course is how he relates to everyone already. There's no offense in that, and no love either. Scripture teaches that because of God's love for us, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us (Rom. 5:8). And it is only by virtue of Christ's death and resurrection

we can receive the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, Abba! Father!" (Rom. 8:15).

Sixth, therefore, we do not doubt his provision. All of this theology is moving us somewhere. Because God created everything out of nothing, and because he still sustains his creation by his providence, and because the God who did and does all this is our Father by virtue of our union with Christ—because of all this, we can trust God. He will provide our bodies with the strength we need to praise him and our souls the nourishment we need to keep the faith. Seventh, he will turn to good whatever adversity he sends me. The Catechism, like the Bible, is not naïve about suffering. Trusting in God's provision does not mean we expect to float to heaven on flowery beds of ease. Most of us hear "trust" and "provision" and think, "Good. I won't be poor. I'll get better soon. My friends won't hurt me again." But the Catechism points us in an opposite direction. This is a "sad world" we live in, one in which God not only allows trouble, but sends adversity to us. Trust, therefore, does not mean hoping for the absence of pain, but believing in the purpose of pain. I was quite sick this week (with a personal best vomit count) and began wondering, more personally than usual, "What's the point in this? How is this helping anyone?" I don't claim to have figured out human suffering out in three days, but my recent reading of Exodus helped. If God had a grander, glorious, salvific purpose in keeping his people in slavery for four centuries (four weeks would have seemed sufficient to me), then I suppose God might know what he's doing with my pain and yours, no matter how long or senseless it feels. After all, if my almighty God is really almighty and my heavenly Father is really fatherly, then why not trust that he can and will do what is good for me in this sad world.

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