



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 21 - May 25, 2008

54 **Q.** *What do you believe concerning "the holy catholic church"?*

A. I believe that the Son of God through his Spirit and Word, out of the entire human race, from the beginning of the world to its end, gathers, protects, and preserves for himself a community chosen for eternal life and united in true faith. And of this living community I am and always will be a living member.

55 **Q.** *What do you understand by "the communion of saints"?*

A. First, that believers one and all, as members of this community, share in Christ and in all his treasures and gifts. Second, that each member should consider it a duty to use these gifts readily and cheerfully for the service and enrichment of the other members.

56 **Q.** *What do you believe concerning "the forgiveness of sins"?*

A. I believe that God, because of Christ's atonement, will never hold against me any of my sins nor my sinful nature which I need to struggle against all my life. Rather, in his grace God grants me the righteousness of Christ to free me forever from judgment.

Right now I have a whole stack of books at home about why the church is lame. It's too institutional, too organized, too predictable, too political, and too intolerant. I don't doubt that all five adjectives hit the mark at times, but even if they hit it much of the time it wouldn't change the fact that the church was Christ's idea (see Matthew 16). There is no New Testament evidence of churchless Christians. New converts in the early church were baptized in Christ *and* into a body. Acts tells us the Lord added daily to their number those who were being saved. The Lord wasn't saving random people into individual saving relationships. He was adding people to the already visible, identifiable body of Christ.

Perhaps we would be less likely to overlook the importance of the church if we paid more attention to the Apostles' Creed. After all, almost every Christian agrees the Creed is a good summary of the essentials of the faith, and the Creed has us confess, "I believe in the holy catholic church." I believe in God the Father. I believe in Jesus Christ his only Son. I believe in the Holy Spirit. I believe in the church. If three of those matter, the fourth probably does too.

The Greek word for church is *ekklesia* which means "gathering" or "assembly" coming from two Greek words meaning "called out ones." The simplest definition of the church is a community of persons called by God through his Word and Spirit to be his people (Answer 54). More specifically, theologians often speak of the church in terms of catholicity, apostolicity, and unity. We believe in the catholic or universal church, a community not defined by culture or race but by one Lord and one baptism. We believe in the apostolic church, an institution built on the foundation of the doctrine of the apostles. And we believe in a united church, a group of diverse people and local expressions sharing, not simply a slogan or a religious experience, but one true faith. As believers we belong to this holy church, owe to her our allegiance, and as part of this body, owe each other our love and service.

Q/A 56 covers ground the Catechism has traversed before. We've already read about the substitutionary atonement, God's grace for sinners, and salvation from coming judgment. All of this is summarized again in Answer 56. But notice two other points. First, the catechism is decidedly not perfectionistic. There is no

illusion that the Christian will overcome outward and inward sin. There is no false assurance that we are going to go weeks or days (or even hours) without anger creeping into our souls, or lust stealing away our thoughts, our pride trying to usurp our hearts. On the contrary, I will struggle against my sinful nature all my life.

This means I can't automatically assume that the desires I have as a Christian are pure and pleasing to God. Sometimes you hear people say that sort of thing. "I am a new creation. God has given me a new heart. My desires are not suspect; they are from God himself." This kind of thinking grossly underestimates the power of remaining sin in our lives. The mortification of the flesh is not a one time event, but an on-going process. Each morning there are new temptations to avoid and more works of the flesh to put to death.

But, strangely, I find this more encouraging than discouraging. If the Lord gives me another thirty years, I will wake up as a 60 year old and still be frustrated by myself. I can count it. I will not be completely sanctified. There will be growth and maturity, but not perfection. I will still be struggling with my self-centeredness, impatience, and indifference to so much of God's glory. And because of Christ's blood, God will still not hold these sins against me. This is not excuse for laziness in the war against sin, but it is a call for perpetual joy and gratitude at the forgiveness that is mine through no work of my own.

Second, Answer 56 makes explicit the doctrine of the imputation of Christ's righteousness. Christ not only died the shameful death we deserved. He also lived the perfect life we could not. There has been a great exchange: my sin for his righteousness. Certainly, the focus of the gospel message is on the decisive victory won for us in Christ's death and resurrection, but his life is also essential to my salvation. I love the story of the great Presbyterian churchman and theologian J. Gresham Machen. Just before he died alone on New Year's Day 1936 in a North Dakota hospital he wrote to a friend and colleague: "I am so thankful for the active obedience of Christ. No hope without it." Most of us have never heard of the "active obedience of Christ" let alone would we think to use the phrase for our last recorded words on earth. Theologians call the perfect life of Jesus his "active obedience" and Jesus' willingness to die his "passive obedience." So Machen's dying hope was that Christ had lived the perfect life for his sake. He was confident not only that the death of Jesus made him innocent before God, but that the life of Jesus made him positively righteous. At the throne of judgment we will not merely be given a verdict of innocent; we will be declared well-pleasing and perfect in God's sight.