



Thoughts from the Bible and Books

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Devotion to Christ and Devotions from the Heidelberg Catechism

I love the Heidelberg Catechism, not like I love my wife or I love the Bible, but in a deeper way than I love the Chicago Bears and a more eternal way than I love pizza (yes, even pizza). “Love” and “Catechism” are not two words usually heard together, unless it’s something like “I love that my church doesn’t make kids learn catechism anymore.” Nevertheless, I freely confess I love the Heidelberg Catechism. I love it because it’s old, it’s biblical, and it’s true. It’s not perfect. It’s not infallible. But it is trustworthy and beautiful, simple and deep. I love the Heidelberg Catechism because I love the gospel it expounds and the salvation it proclaims.

I grew up with the Heidelberg. I don’t recall having to memorize it cold like some organic chemistry nightmare. It wasn’t front and center in my life, but it was there. I’ll forever be grateful to my pastor for making me read the Heidelberg Catechism and meet in his big office with him to talk about it before I made profession of faith in the fourth grade. I was nervous to meet with him, even more nervous to meet before all the elders. But both meetings were pleasant. And besides, I was forced to read through all 129 questions and answers at age 9. That was a blessing I didn’t realize at the time. Ever since then I’ve had a copy of the Catechism and have grown to understand it and cherish it more and more over the years.

Not everyone is as keen on catechism as I am. For some, catechisms are too linear, too systematic, too propositional. For others, the catechism gets a bad rap because, fairly or unfairly, the only stories that we hear about catechetical instruction are the stories of old Domine VanderSoandso who threatened to smite us hip and thigh if we couldn’t remember what God required of us in the eighth commandment. More often, catechisms simply never get tried because they are said to be about theology and theology is said to be boring and words like “Heidelberg” and “Westminster” are even more boring. (Incidentally, I have never been a fan of snazzy Sunday School curriculum that tries to pretend that a catechism is something

other than questions and answers about the Bible. You can call it “Journeys with God from the Palatinate” or “Heidelberg Truth Rockets” but it’s still a catechism and our kids know it.)

But even with all this bad press, I think the Catechism can make a comeback. All of us—kids and adults—need to know the Bible better than we know the Heidelberg Catechism. That’s true. But all of us—kids and adults—can have our faith strengthened, our knowledge broadened, and our love for Jesus deepened by devoting ourselves to reading the Heidelberg Catechism. I’ll never forget sitting in my Christian Education class at my evangelical, non-Dutch, non-denominational seminary. One of our assigned texts was the Heidelberg Catechism—this little book that growing up was usually good for rolling the eyes of students into the backs of their little heads. But my fellow students at seminary marvelled at this piece of work. “Where has this been all their lives?” “This will be perfect for Sunday School!” “I’m going to use this for new member’s classes!” Most of the Dutch Reformed kids I knew were ready to see the Heidelberg Catechism go the way of the dodo bird. But at seminary, my classmates were seeing something many of my peers had missed. The Heidelberg Catechism is really, really good.

History and Structure

In 1562, Elector Frederick III of the Palatinate, a princely state of the Holy Roman Empire (think Germany), ordered the preparation of a new catechism for his territory. A new catechism would serve three purposes: (1) as a tool for teaching children, (2) as a guide for preachers, and (3) as a form for confessional unity among the Protestant factions in the Palatinate. Frederick wanted a unifying catechism that avoided theological labels and was plainly rooted in the texts of Scripture. To

that end, he commissioned a team of theological professors and ministers (along with Frederick himself) to draft a new catechism. Although the catechism was truly a team effort (including Caspar Olevianus who used to be considered a co-author of the catechism, but now is seen as simply one valuable member of the committee), there is little doubt the chief author was Zacharias Ursinus.



Ursinus, a professor at the university in Heidelberg, was born on July 18, 1534 in what is today Poland but at that time was part of Austria. Ursinus was the chief architect of the Heidelberg Catechism, basing many of the questions and answers on his own Shorter Catechism, and to a lesser extent, his Larger Catechism. The Heidelberg Catechism reflects Ursinus’ theological convictions (firmly Protestant with Calvinist influence) and his warm, irenic spirit.¹

This new catechism was first published in Heidelberg (the leading city of the Palatinate) in January 1563, going through several revisions that same year. The Catechism was quickly translated into Latin and Dutch, and soon after into French and English. Besides the Bible, John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, and Thomas a Kempis’ *Imitation of Christ*, the Heidelberg Catechism is the most widely circulated book in the world. Since its publication in 1563, the Heidelberg Catechism has been used in scores of languages and is widely praised as the most devotional, most loved catechism of the Reformation.²

Like most catechisms in the Western Church during Christendom, the Heidelberg catechism is largely a commentary on the Apostle’s Creed, the Ten Commandments, and the Lord’s Prayer. Heidelberg’s structure is unique, however, in two ways. First, the overall structure fits into the pattern of salvation found in the book of Romans. After two introductory questions, the Catechism deals with man’s misery (3-11), man’s deliverance (12-85), and finally, man’s response (86-129)—or to put it more memorably: guilt, grace, and gratitude. Second, the Heidelberg Catechism’s 129 questions and answers are divided

into 52 Lord's Day. Besides making it easy to preach from the Catechism (one of its original purposes), this division also makes the Catechism convenient for family devotions every Sunday or personal catechetical reflection once a week.

2008: Year of the Heidelberg

After thinking long and hard about what I'm getting into, I've decided to write weekly devotionals on the 52 Lord's Days of the Heidelberg Catechism for 2008. Jesus' words about counting the cost have come to mind more than once. But I'm convinced this is a good undertaking worth the time and commitment. So, starting in January, I'll be writing a weekly devotional on the Heidelberg Catechism for its 52 Lord's Days.³ This means no monthly TBBs for awhile (go ahead, wipe that tear from your eye). You will be able to pick up the devotionals in the lobby each Sunday. You'll also be able to access them on our website throughout the year. Whether I have anything worthwhile to say about the Catechism remains to be seen, but just reading through it by yourself or with your family will be good for your soul. I'm sure of it. The Heidelberg Catechism is perfect for children and new believers and for anyone who wants a better grounding for his faith. The Catechism can even be used in explaining to non-Christians what Christianity is all about. I encourage you to put these devotionals to good use.

Personally, I have wondered if I may live to regret such an ambitious undertaking. But I don't think I will. I am confident that writing about the gospel which is so elegantly and logically explained in the Catechism will be a labor of love (although, check back with me next December). I wouldn't be spending a year in the Catechism if I didn't think doing so would help me know the Bible better and love Jesus more. I am disappointed to think of how many Protestants, and Reformed Christians in particular, don't know of this treasure right under their noses. I am even more saddened to think of pastors and professors in the Reformed tradition who know the Catechism and don't cherish the truths it proclaims. But I am excited to imagine how God might use this four centuries old document in my life and in yours. If you've found understanding the Bible a bit like exploring America on foot (overwhelming and slow-going), why not use the Heidelberg Catechism as a map to help show you the main attractions others have discovered and kindly marked out for you.⁴ As the saying goes, you can see farther when standing on the shoulders of giants. The Heidelberg Catechism is a giant of mind-sharpening, Christ-worshiping, soul-inspiring devotion. Stand on its shoulders and see more of Christ who saves us from our guilt by his grace and makes us, through his Spirit, wholeheartedly willing and ready to live for him.



¹ For more on the history of the Catechism see Lyle D. Bierma, et. al., *An Introduction to the Heidelberg Catechism: Sources, History, and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005).

² *Reformed Confessions Harmonized With an Annotated Bibliography of Reformed Doctrinal Works*, edited by Joel R. Beeke and Sinclair B. Ferguson (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), x.

³ I'll be using the Christian Reformed Church translation of the Heidelberg Catechism, approved in 1975, with editorial revisions added in 1988.

⁴ This metaphor comes from G.I. Williamson, *The Heidelberg Catechism: A Study Guide* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1993). Other helpful commentaries include: Fred H. Klooster, *Our Only Comfort: A Comprehensive Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism, Volumes One and Two* (Grand Rapids: Faith Alive, 2001) and *The Commentary of Dr. Zacharias Ursinus of the Heidelberg Catechism*, Trans. G.W. Willard (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1852 [reprint]). Any references to these works in the devotionals will be cited as Williamson, Klooster, and Ursinus respectively.