



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 30 - July 27, 2008

80 **Q.** *How does the Lord's Supper differ from the Roman Catholic Mass?*

A. The Lord's Supper declares to us that our sins have been completely forgiven through the one sacrifice of Jesus Christ which he himself finished on the cross once for all. It also declares to us that the Holy Spirit grafts us into Christ, who with his very body is now in heaven at the right hand of the Father where he wants us to worship him. But the Mass teaches that the living and the dead do not have their sins forgiven through the suffering of Christ unless Christ is still offered for them daily by the priests. It also teaches that Christ is bodily present in the form of bread and wine where Christ is therefore to be worshiped. Thus the Mass is basically nothing but a denial of the one sacrifice and suffering of Jesus Christ and a condemnable idolatry.

81 **Q.** *Who are to come to the Lord's table?*

A. Those who are displeased with themselves because of their sins, but who nevertheless trust that their sins are pardoned and that their continuing weakness is covered by the suffering and death of Christ, and who also desire more and more to strengthen their faith and to lead a better life. Hypocrites and those who are unrepentant, however, eat and drink judgment on themselves.

82 **Q.** *Are those to be admitted to the Lord's Supper who show by what they say and do that they are unbelieving and ungodly?*

A. No, that would dishonor God's covenant and bring down God's anger upon the entire congregation. Therefore, according to the instruction of Christ and his apostles, the Christian church is duty-bound to exclude such people, by the official use of the keys of the kingdom, until they reform their lives.

It's been four weeks since I've been at URC and four weeks since the last Heidelberg devotional. I contemplated keeping up with the Lord's Days while I was on study leave, but thought it made more sense to take a break from the normal routine and focus on my two book projects. So, if you are one of the few and the proud who have been collecting these essays each week, you'll be missing Lord's Day 26-29, at least for some time. I will eventually make up these four weeks, but it may not be until the year is over. Still, I figured it was better to keep with the Lord's Day calendar schedule rather than go back to week 26 and finish the year at the end of January. But hey, at least you got an exceptionally long devotional this week.

So today we come to Lord's Day 30. This is easily the most controversial section in the whole Catechism. The controversy comes in Q/A 80, which we'll get to in a moment. But first let me mention a few things from the other two questions.

I love how pastoral the Catechism is. People who write off catechism as dry and dusty, as freeze-dried dogma, have never read Heidelberg. Isn't it comforting to know for Answer 81 that the Lord's Table is not for those who smile all the time and have great self-esteem, but for those who are "displeased with themselves because of their sins"? Being very aware of my own spiritual deadness at times and my coldness to Christ, I find it wonderfully encouraging that the Supper is for those with "continuing weakness" who, although they are seriously flawed, "desire more and more to strengthen their faith and to lead a better life."

Communion is for the weak, but it is not for the hypocrite. Hypocrites are not those who live worse than they profess—that's all of us. Hypocrites are those who cannot see, or are not honest about the gap between their talk and their walk. The Table is for those who hate their sins, not for those who coddle them or excuse them or

make no effort to turn from them. These persons must not be admitted to the Lord's Supper, lest they "dishonor God's covenant" and "bring God's anger upon the entire congregation" (A 82). 1 Corinthians 11 has some frightening verses: "Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died" (11:27-30). If ever there was a text exhorting the elders to take seriously the responsibility of church discipline, surely it is this. The church in Corinth was beset with illness and even death because the Table had been defiled. To partake of the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner is to show contempt for the Lord's covenant and, hence, to merit God's covenant curses upon his covenant people.

As if this wasn't hard enough, now we'll move to the bigger controversy.

Heidelberg is famous for being an irenic document. There is no nailing of Lutherans to the wall, or drowning of Anabaptists, or anathematizing Catholics in the spirit of what goes around comes around. But there is this concluding line from Answer 80 where Ursinus and his buddies take the gloves off: "Thus the Mass is basically nothing but a denial of the one sacrifice and suffering of Jesus Christ and a condemnable idolatry." True, as almost every English translation points out, Q/A 80 was not present in the first edition (January 1563) of the Catechism. But the present form was included by the third edition (published later in 1563) and has always been the standard received text. In fact, the first edition was lost until 1864. So while it may be tempting to excise this answer from the Catechism, there are no good grounds to do so. Ever since the end of 1563, Q/A 80 has been considered an official part of the Catechism as much as any other question and answer.

So what are we to make of this harsh language in Answer 80? Well, before assessing the rightness or wrongness of Lord's Day 30, we need some historical background. The Catholic worship service is called a Mass, which comes from the Latin word for "dismissal" (*Ite, missa est* is the concluding line in the Latin Mass). Unlike Protestant services where the sermon is the focal point, for Catholics the main event is the Eucharist (what we call Lord's Supper or Communion). The priest may give a ten minute homily on a passage of Scripture (I've heard from Catholic friends that 15 minutes is considered long), but the Eucharistic celebration is what makes Mass a Mass.

At the heart of the Catholic understanding of the Eucharist is a belief in the real physical presence of Christ in the bread and the wine. Catholics believe that the elements are transubstantiated, so that when consecrated by the priest, the bread and wine actually become the flesh and blood of Christ. For Catholics, the Lord's Supper is not just a memorial service remembering Christ's death, or even a spiritual presence where we feast on Christ in a mystical, spiritual way. The Eucharist, in the Catholic tradition, is also a sacrifice.

And this is what the authors of the Heidelberg Catechism found so offensive in the Catholic Mass. In fact, the reason the Catechism added Q/A 80 in the third edition was, most likely, in order to respond to the Council of Trent. On September 17, 1562, the twenty-second session of the Council of Trent, the official arm of the Catholic counter-reformation, met and issued a statement "on the sacrifice of the Mass." (The first edition of the Heidelberg Catechism was not able to touch on Trent's statement, which is why a revision several months later was necessary.) The Council of Trent pronounced, in no uncertain terms, that the Mass was a re-presenting, not just symbolically but actually, of Christ's atoning death: "And forasmuch as in this divine sacrifice which is celebrated in the mass, that same Christ is contained and immolated in an unbloody manner who once offered himself in a bloody manner on the altar of the cross; the holy Synod teaches that this sacrifice is truly propitiatory, and that by means thereof this is effected, that we obtain mercy and find grace...For the victim is one and the same, the same now offering by the ministry of priests, who then offered himself on the cross, the manner alone of offering being different" (*Canons of Trent*, 22.2). In other words, in the Mass, Christ is sacrificed again for the forgiveness of sins. "The sacrifice of Christ and the sacrifice of the Eucharist are *one single sacrifice*..." (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1367).

But Scripture teaches that Christ's atoning work is finished. He still intercedes for us as our High Priest, but the work of redemption has been accomplished. Christ's sacrifice was once for all, never to be repeated (John 19:30; 9:25-26; 10:10-18). There is no need for Christ to be offered again (Heb. 7:27). Our eternal redemption has been secured (Heb. 9:12). Where there is forgiveness for our lawless deeds, there is no longer any offering for sin (Heb. 10:18).

The whole notion that the Eucharist is "propitiatory" (i.e., turns aside the wrath of God) transforms the gospel from a declaration of Christ's work already done for us into a sacrament whereby Christ must die yet again for our sins. This is a serious mistake. I respect many Catholics (Pope John Paul, Pope Benedict) and have read many Catholic writers with great profit (Tolkien, Chesterton, Neuhaus). I have known many sincere Catholics (along with the nominal variety too) and count some as friends. I don't get my kicks bashing Catholics when I'm bored on Saturday night. But on this issue of the Eucharist as a propitiatory sacrifice, my disagreement must be registered very clearly and strongly. Catholic teaching on the Eucharist undermines the efficacy of Christ's death, the sufficiency of his atonement, and the finality of his redemptive work. These are not insignificant issues.

More to the point, though the language may offend my twenty-first century ears, I still stand by Heidelberg's phraseology at the end of Answer 80. Perhaps the Catechism is not insensitive, so much as I am sensitive to the wrong things. Perhaps, removed 450 years from the eye of the storm, I'd rather let bygones be bygones than take a hard look at what the controversy was all about. Notice, the Catechism does not condemn all Catholics. What it does is condemn the Mass as idolatry. So after much soul searching, I have to conclude that it would be a mistake to jettison Heidelberg's choice of language.

The reason I would not change Answer 80 is, ironically enough, because of something I read a few years ago in a book written by two Catholics. Scott Hahn is a popular Catholic apologist who teaches at the Franciscan University of Steubenville. In the book, *Rome Sweet Rome: Our Journey to Catholicism*, Scott and his wife Kimberly tell their story of converting from conservative Presbyterianism to Roman Catholicism. Scott actually went to Gordon-Conwell (before I was there) and counts as one of his mentors John Gerstner (who was foundational for our own Tom Stark). On page 142, Kimberly tells how, on her way to becoming Catholic, she starting looking at the Eucharist differently:

One evening, we had an opportunity to be at a Mass where there was a Eucharistic procession at the end. I had never seen this before. As I watched row after row of grown men and women kneel and bow when the monstrance¹ passed by, I thought, These people believe that this is the Lord, and not just bread and wine. If this is Jesus, that is the only appropriate response. If one should kneel before a king today, how much more before the King of Kings? the Lord of Lords? Is it safe to kneel or not? But, I continued to ruminate, what if it's not? If that is not Jesus in the monstrance, then what they are doing is gross idolatry. So, is it safe to kneel?

Kimberly Hahn eventually felt it was safe to kneel. I don't agree with her decision. But she has presented the options with refreshing clarity. If transubstantiation is true, then the Mass is pleasing to God and we ought to give adoration to the consecrated host. But if Jesus wasn't even talking about the Lord's Supper in John 6, and if "this is my body" is to be taken no more concretely than "I am the gate", and if the doctrine of transubstantiation owes more to Aristotellian categories than careful exegesis, then Kimberly Hahn's fear about the Mass is justified. It is not safe to kneel, and it is a gross idolatry.

¹ A monstrance is the vessel used in Catholic services to display (de-monstrate) the consecrated Eucharistic host. After the elements are transubstantiated, they are placed in the monstrance so they can be adored and revered as Christ himself.

