



Thoughts from the Bible and Books Devotions from The Heidelberg Catechism

University Reformed Church

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86 **Q.** *We have been delivered from our misery by God's grace alone through Christ and not because we have earned it: why then must we still do good?*

A. To be sure, Christ has redeemed us by his blood. But we do good because Christ by his Spirit is also renewing us to be like himself, so that in all our living we may show that we are thankful to God for all he has done for us, and so that he may be praised through us. And we do good so that we may be assured of our faith by its fruits, and so that by our godly living our neighbors may be won over to Christ.

87 **Q.** *Can those be saved who do not turn to God from their ungrateful and impenitent ways?*

A. By no means. Scripture tells us that no unchaste person, no idolater, adulterer, thief, no covetous person, no drunkard, slanderer, robber, or the like is going to inherit the kingdom of God.

With this Lord's Day, we begin the third major section of the Heidelberg Catechism - Guilt, Grace, and now Gratitude. One of the major objections to the Christian view of salvation, especially in its Reformed expression, is that salvation by grace alone through faith alone leads to moral license. If we can't earn one tiny iota of deliverance from sin by our good works, then why do good at all?

The catechism gives five reasons. First, we do good because the Holy Spirit is working in us to make us more like Jesus (2 Cor. 3:18). The same Spirit who caused us to be born again and enabled us to believe will also work to make us holy (Rom. 6:9-11). Second, we do good out of gratitude (Rom. 12:1-2). This is not to suggest that God saves us and then we work the rest of our lives to pay him back for the favor (Rom. 11:33-36). Rather, we do good because the wonder of our salvation produces such thankfulness in our hearts that it is our pleasure to serve God. Third, we do good so that God might be praised by the works we display in his name. "By this my Father is gloried," Jesus said, "that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples" (John 15:8). Fourth, we do good so that we can be assured of our right standing before God. Faith alone justifies, but the faith that justifies is never alone. By bearing good fruit, we show that we are a good tree (Matt. 7:15-20) and make our calling and election sure (2 Peter 1:10). Fifth, we do good in order that we might adorn the gospel (Titus 2:10)

and make it attractive to outsiders (1 Peter 2:12).

The Bible, then, is not indifferent to good works. Christians who live in habitual, unrepentant sin show themselves not to be true Christians. Of course, we all stumble (James 3:2; 1 John 1:8). But there's a difference between falling into sin and jumping in with both feet. It doesn't matter the sin - pride, slander, robbery, covetousness, or sexual immorality - if we give ourselves to it and live in it with joyful abandon, we will not inherit the kingdom of God. Simply put, people walking day after day in the same sin without a fight or repentance go to hell (1 Cor. 6:9-10; Gal. 5:19-21; 1 John 3:14).

This teaching in Q/A 87 prompts a related, and heavily debated, question: Does the Heidelberg Catechism forbid homosexual behavior? For most everyone in this church, the issue of homosexuality does not need to be settled by some 16th century catechism. Texts from Romans 1, 1 Corinthians 6, 1 Timothy 1, Leviticus 18 and 20, and Jude make clear what every first century Jew would have perfectly understood: same sex acts are a violation of the seventh commandment and offensive in God's eyes. But since the sinfulness of homosexuality is, sadly, a controversial topic in the RCA, whether or not our confessions address the issue becomes an important question.

An investigation of the authorial intent behind Q/A 87 leads us to the conclusion that, almost certainly,

the Catechism means to forbid homosexual behavior. Interestingly enough, but not at all surprising, the Presbyterian Church (USA) just voted this summer to change the wording of Q/A 87 to remove a previous reference to homosexuality in their translation of the Catechism. The 1962 translation of the Catechism by Allen Miller and Eugene Osterhaven (longtime professor at Western Theological Seminary) includes “homosexual perversion” in the list of sins mentioned in Answer 87. The newer CRC translation, which I have been using for these devotionals, uses the word “unchaste.” The difference lays with the fact that Osterhaven and Miller, recognizing correctly that Answer 87 is a paraphrase of 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, included the full Corinthians text from the New English Bible in their translation. Admittedly, this is poor translation practice, which is why the CRC translation simply translates the German word *unkeuscher* with “unchaste.” The newer translation is better. But Osterhaven and Miller were at least - and this is according to their own stated purpose - trying to capture the authorial intent behind the text. The translation is poor, but they were right about the meaning.

In summarizing 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, Ursinus (Heidelberg’s chief author) does not include every sin in the vice list. Most notably, he leaves out several terms related to sexual immorality. This is certainly not because Ursinus and the reformers were ambiguous in their assessment of homosexuality. The reason no explicit mention is made of homosexuality in Answer 87 is because it was considered inappropriate and obscene to even mention such deeds in the 16th century. That’s why the Catechism includes the phrase “or the like” - we are meant to fill in the blanks with the rest of the text, the part of the text not fit to be printed for all to see. As Robert Gagnon, probably the world’s foremost scholar on homosexuality and the Bible, points out, when Calvin comments on Romans 1:26-27, 1 Cor. 6:9, and Jude 7 in his commentaries he mentions homosexuality only obliquely, referring to the actions and desires as “monstrous,” “polluted,” “most filthy and detestable,” and “the most abominable.” Gagnon also notes that as late as the early 20th century, the standard edition of ancient Greek texts (Loeb Classical Library) published by Harvard University Press “would routinely render Greek classical texts into Latin rather than English whenever coming across favorable discussions of homosexual practice.” To

talk or write openly about homosexuality was, for many, simply impolite.

Furthermore, we must remember that Frederick’s first purpose in commissioning the Heidelberg Catechism was “that our youth may be trained”. The Catechism was meant first of all for children, and children, it was thought, should not be corrupted by exposure to such unnatural behavior. Adults would have understood that Answer 87 forbids all the vices mentioned in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, including the ones left out or too unseemly to mention.

Clearly, Ursinus believed homosexual behavior to be a sin. In his commentary on the Catechism, he defines marriage as “a lawful and indissoluble union between one man and one woman, instituted by God for the propagation of the human race...” Just as importantly, he says with regard to the seventh commandment: “The first class or kind [of lust] are those which are contrary to nature, and from the devil—such as are even contrary to this our corrupt nature; not only because they are corrupt and spoil it of conformity with God, but also because this our corrupt nature shrinks from them and abhors them. The lusts of which the Apostle Paul speaks in the first chapter of his Epistle to the Romans, are of this class, as the confounding of the sexes, also abuses of the female sex.” Not only do we see here an unmistakable rejection of homosexual behavior, we also see Ursinus’ reticence to talk of it in frank terms, referring to such behavior as “the confounding of the sexes” and “the lusts of which the Apostle Paul speaks in the first chapter of his Epistle to the Romans.”

There is incontrovertible evidence, then, that the chief author of the Heidelberg Catechism thought homosexuality a sin (which should come as no surprise because everyone thought it was a sin in the 16th century). We also have good evidence that Christians of the 16th century, not to mention Ursinus himself, were embarrassed to name openly the act of same-sex intercourse. We also have evidence in the words “or the like” that we are meant to mentally fill in the blanks with the rest of 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 referenced in Answer 87. All of this leads to the strong conclusion that while Osterhaven and Miller may have been wrong, from the standpoint of translation philosophy, to insert words in the Catechism that weren’t there in the original, they were not wrong to think that the words they inserted, including “homosexual perversion”, captured the spirit of the Catechism and the true authorial intent of the text, not to mention the clear teaching of Scripture.

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