



Thoughts from the Bible and Books Devotions from The Heidelberg Catechism

University Reformed Church

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Lord's Day 46 - November 16, 2008

120 **Q.** *Why did Christ command us to call God "our Father"?*

A. At the very beginning of our prayer Christ wants to kindle in us what is basic to our prayer—the child-like awe and trust that God through Christ has become our Father. Our fathers do not refuse us that things of this life; God our Father will even less refuse to give us what we ask in faith.

121 **Q.** *Why the words "in heaven"?*

A. Those words teach us not to think of God's heavenly majesty as something earthly, and to expect everything for body and soul from his almighty power.

Because of travel, extra pastoral care concerns, and the election, I have not written on the Heidelberg Catechism for almost a month. Instead of starting where we left off, I've chosen to stay with the Lord's Day schedule and jump over Lord's Day 43, 44, and 45. That means we've missed commandments nine and ten, and the introduction to the final section of the Catechism. Like many other catechisms, Heidelberg is structured around three main elements: the Apostles' Creed, the Ten Commandments, and the Lord's Prayer. Lord's Day 45 explained the importance of prayer and introduced the prayer Jesus taught his disciples to pray. Lord's Day 47 through the end of the Catechism (and the year) will cover the six requests in the Lord's Prayer. Today, we look at the opening address.

Christ commands us to call God "our Father." True, God is neither male nor female. He is spirit and doesn't have a body. But he has revealed himself as Father, not Mother; as King, not Queen; as Husband, not Wife. This doesn't mean the Bible never describes God with maternal characteristics. But it means that if we are to be true to the example of biblical revelation, we ought to pray to God as he has named himself. The ancient world was filled with goddesses and heavenly female consorts and in some places a divine feminine principle, so we can't write off masculine language for God as capitulation to culture. Besides, Jesus didn't hesitate to buck the cultural norms (even as it related to women) in other instances, so it would

be strange for him to call God "Father" for fear of upsetting the status quo or being misunderstood. The fact of the matter is, the Son of God related to God as "Father" and commands us to pray to God in such terms. "Our Mother God" is not faithful to Scripture. "Creator, Redeemer, Sanctifier" as a replacement for "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" is unacceptable. In short, the unwillingness to acknowledge God as "Father" is an affront to God's gracious and perfect self-disclosure.

Granted, the Fatherhood of God will be challenging for some. Some Christians grew up with lame fathers, abusive fathers, or no father at all. We can sympathize with those for whom "Father" stirs up all sorts of bad connotations. But sympathy does not trump Scripture. We ought to interpret our experiences through God's revelation and not the other way around. So instead of running from the Fatherhood of God because we had a bad father, we ought to let God define true Fatherhood for us and grieve that our fathers fell so far from the divine example. For those who hate their father, learning to love our heavenly Father can bring necessary healing and forgiveness.

Embracing God as Father is part of our discipleship as Christians. We call on God as Father in our prayers to remind us that we are his children and he knows what is best for us. As the Catechism puts it, "childlike awe and trust" are basic to our prayer. I don't know that my kids stand in awe of me. They

certainly aren't always obedient. But I can see that they look up to me. They want to do what I do. They copy my actions and mannerisms (for better or worse). They want my attention and approval.

And especially when they are younger, kids think their dads are invincible. I don't know about girls, but the boys I knew as a child frequently bantered back and forth "my dad can beat up your dad" or "my dad is bigger than your dad" or "my dad is smarter than yours." The competition may not have been healthy, but the respect was. Young kids think their dad can do everything. Even when they don't listen to them, kids are in awe of their fathers.

They also trust Dad. My kids (as far as I can tell) never wonder if I'm lacing their Cheerios with arsenic. They don't fear that when I walk them to the park I'm secretly selling them off to Ishmaelite traders. My kids, at least at the ages of 5, 3, and 1, don't doubt that I love them. They grab my hand when crossing the road because it makes them feel safe. There is implicit trust that I will protect them, defend them, and take care of them. This should be our posture in prayer. We are not bowing before a tyrannical despot or distant deity. We are praying to our Father. He's bigger, better, and stronger than any earthly father. He loves us more fiercely, understands us more deeply, and delights in us more fully.

As a dad, I absolutely thrill to see my children happy. I love to help them when they humbly ask for help. I never begrudge feeding them, clothing them, or giving them a bed to sleep in. Even we who are evil know how to give good gifts to our children. How much more, then, does our heavenly Father love to help his broken hearted children when they come to him in faith? Though God may discipline his children and lead us through valleys we would not have chosen, we should never doubt that God is on our side. I am a flawed dad in dozens of ways. But I hope my children will always know that I love them, that I want what is good for them, and will always do what I think is best to help them. All parents wish for this from their children, even though our love is weak, our good is not always great, and our help is not always helpful. So how much more ought we who belong to a perfect Father, call upon him with complete trust that he loves us, wants what is good for us, and serves us in ways that are best?

What's more, as the Catechism reminds us, our Father is in heaven. "God is your Father" is a profound truth, but so is the reverse: "Your Father is God." Our Father is not the tallest dad on the block, but the King in heaven. He is not the smartest guy in town, but the all-knowing ruler of the universe. He is not the most influential man on the school board, but Lord over all creation. When we pray to God we are not petitioning some local powerbroker or political big wig or academic know it all. We are making our requests before the one who rules over all from his heavenly throne (Q/A 121). As the young theologians sometimes sing, "My God is so big! So strong and so mighty! There's nothing my God cannot do!"

We scarcely reflect on the privilege of relating to God as "Father." We are not children of God by birthright. By nature we are children of wrath and sons of disobedience, strangers from God and at enmity toward him. But by new birth and union with Christ, we are adopted as sons and daughters (Catechism: 'God through Christ *has become* our Father'). It is only through God the Son that we have the right to call God "Father." When we carelessly refer to the "universal Fatherhood of God" or casually speak of every human as a "child of God" we not only marginalize the Bible's understanding of spiritual adoption, we also underappreciate the unique gift we have as Christians that we can call God "our Father." "Christ commands us to call God 'our Father': this inestimable privilege is for our good as we relate to God with childlike awe and trust, and for his glory as we call on God in the way his Son taught us to pray.

~ written by Kevin DeYoung