



Thoughts from the Bible and Books Devotions from The Heidelberg Catechism

University Reformed Church

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Lord's Day 23 - June 8, 2008

59 **Q.** *What good does it do you, however, to believe all this?*

A. In Christ I am right with God and heir to life everlasting.

60 **Q.** *How are you right with God?*

A. Only by true faith in Jesus Christ. Even though my conscience accuses me of having grievously sinned against God's commandments and of never having kept any of them, and even though I am still inclined toward all evil, nevertheless, without my deserving it at all, out of sheer grace, God grants and credits to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ, as if I had never sinned nor been a sinner, as if I had been as perfectly obedient as Christ was obedient for me. All I need to do is to accept this gift of God with a believing heart.

61 **Q.** *Why do you say that by faith alone you are right with God?*

A. It is not because of any value my faith has that God is pleased with me. Only Christ's satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness make me right with God. And I can receive this righteousness and make it mine in no other way than by faith alone.

From Lord's Day 7-22, we've been looking at what we need to believe as Christians. Phrase by phrase, we've worked our way through the Apostles' Creed. After 14 weeks of doctrinal explanation, Question 59 presents a fair, but startling question: "So what?" Ok, so we get the Apostles' Creed, unpack it all and commit it to memory. Whoopdeedoo. What good is it to believe all this?

That's the way a lot of people feel. Confessions are impractical. Catechisms are irrelevant. Statements of faith are hopelessly modern. Doctrine is dry and dusty. Propositions are impersonal. Theology is for brainiacs. The only orthodoxy is orthopraxy. What we need are deeds, not creeds.

Of course, it's true that there is such a thing as dead orthodoxy, but that's because people kill it, not because it isn't living. Dead orthodoxy is no more the fault of orthodoxy than being a dead dog means the dog is to blame. A century ago, G.K Chesterton remarked, "People have fallen into a foolish habit of speaking of orthodoxy as something heavy, humdrum, and safe. There never was anything so perilous or so exciting as orthodoxy. It was sanity: and to be sane is more dramatic than to be mad." Orthodoxy, Chesterton said elsewhere, are the walls of a playground. They hem us in so that in safety we might be able to dance and play around in its truth. And the most freeing truth of all is that in Christ we are right with God and heirs to life everlasting.

"But how are we right with God?" asks Question 60. The answer: "only by true faith in Jesus Christ." This sounds simple enough, at least to Protestant ears, but the explanation that follows in Answers 60 and 61 is more involved than meets the eye. Without using the word, Lord's Day 23 is all about justification, and whenever the 16th century reformers talked about justification they did so very carefully. They understood that Catholic doctrine taught salvation by grace and the necessity of saving faith. But the operation of this grace and the role of faith in salvation were in serious dispute. Hence, Ursinus and the rest of the Heidelberg divines were at pains to clearly delineate their position from the Roman Catholic Church, and in so doing, to safeguard the gospel of God's free grace.

Let me highlight five key concepts in the reformation understanding of justification.

First, the Christian is *simul iustus et peccator*. This is Martin Luther's famous Latin phrase which means "At the same time, justified and a sinner." The Catechism powerfully reminds us that even though we are right with God, we still violate his commands, feel the sting of conscience, and battle against indwelling sin. On this side of the consummation, we will always be sinning saints, righteous wretches, and on occasion even justified jerks.