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THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM



THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM

A STUDY GUIDE

G. I. Williamson



P U B L I S H I N G

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To
Dick G. Vanderpyl
An Elder who never stopped growing.



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FOREWORD

Looming over the river Neckar, and watching over the ancient city, is the great castle of Heidelberg, once the seat of Elector Frederick III. It was here in ancient Heidelberg that the Lord long ago began a great work of reformation in the hearts of the people and their rulers. Lasting testimony of this fact is the so-called Heidelberg Catechism, commissioned by Frederick III himself not long after his accession in 1559, to be a proclamation of the biblical faith to the world.

But the great castle in Heidelberg did not prove the fortress it appeared to be. Heidelberg was sacked and occupied several times during the Thirty Years' War. The castle itself often fell prey to ravaging fire. The moat leaked badly and was in fact never able to be filled. Today there is not much left of the castle, or of the Reformation in Heidelberg. Tours of the ancient city and castle ruins are available, but not one word is spoken of its role in the Reformation. A question directed about the Heidelberg Catechism itself is more likely to leave the tour-guide with a blank unknowing expression.

Yet praise be to our Lord that the labor of the Reformation in Heidelberg has not been completely lost to us. The Catechism, transported to the Netherlands, took root and, since its inception, has become itself a dearly loved guide for generations of Reformed people. But the Catechism doesn't present a tour of ancient ruins. It maps out for the believer the path of salvation revealed in the Scriptures, demonstrating the love of God for a fallen world.

Traditionally the writing of this Catechism has been ascribed to Caspar Olevianus and Zacharias Ursinus. Yet further research in this century has shown that Ursinus alone should be considered the major contributor. Olevianus had no more input in its production than the other theologians and pastors of Heidelberg (i.e., to check it over). Al-

though most of the debate has been in German, a good English summary of the discussion can be found in Frederick H. Klooster's article "The Priority of Ursinus in the Composition of the Heidelberg Catechism," in *Controversy and Conciliation: The Reformation and the Palatinate 1559–1583*, ed. Derk Visser (Allison Park, Pa: Pickwick, 1986). Such research in identifying both the major contributor and his sources has been helpful in understanding the background to our Catechism. It now leaves only the desire that more of the theological works of Ursinus would be translated and published, particularly his *Apologia Catechismi* (*Defense of the Catechism*), written in 1564 to defend the doctrine of the Catechism against various attacks. A new edition of Ursinus's commentary on the Catechism is also long overdue. While that of G. W. Williard (first published 1851, reprinted by Presbyterian and Reformed) can be most helpful, yet his translation is unfortunately often rather inaccurate, sometimes even leading to serious misunderstanding.

Although there is still a need for scholarly historical study of the Catechism, this cannot be said for the equally necessary study guide for the churches. G. I. Williamson has once again done the church an invaluable service by providing this study on the Heidelberg Catechism. In simple and clear language he has opened up the wealth of the Catechism for all to see. G. I.'s long experience as a teacher of catechism has given him the expertise and wisdom that make his study guides so successful. As a former pupil of his I can personally vouch for his dedication to this method of teaching. For that, I myself shall be eternally grateful. When G. I. asked me to write a foreword for this volume, I was only too pleased to oblige. It is my prayer that the Lord will bless its use throughout his churches for the upbuilding of his people.

The value of the Heidelberg Catechism is not restricted to any one age or people, but insofar as it maps the saving doctrines of the Scriptures, it will continue to be used with profit the world over. Perhaps the best way of showing its timeless value is to read once again the introduction attached to the first editions (see the following). I can think of no better introduction to the Catechism or its use.

R. Dean Anderson, Jr.

ORIGINAL INTRODUCTION TO THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM

“A catechism in our Christian Religion” is the name given to a brief and simple orally given summary of the main parts of Christian doctrine in which the youth and beginners are examined and heard on what they have learned. For from the beginning of the Christian church all the godly have been diligent to instruct their children in the fear of the Lord, at home, at school and in church. They did so undoubtedly for the following reasons which shall induce us also to do the same.

In the first place they rightly took into consideration the fact that inborn wickedness would get the upper hand and then pervert churches and civil governments unless it were countered in time by means of salutary doctrine.

In the second place they had the express command of God in Exod 12 and 13 and in Deut 4, 6, and 11 where the Lord says “and these words (the 10 commandments) which I command you this day shall be upon your heart and you shall teach them diligently to your children and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down and when you rise up.”

Finally just as the children of Israel, after circumcision and as soon as they were able to understand, were instructed in the mystery of this covenant sign, and also in the covenant of God, so our children too are to be instructed in the significance of baptism which they have received, and in the true Christian faith and repentance, in order that before they are admitted to the Lord’s table they may profess their faith before the whole Christian congregation.

The Catechism must therefore
be maintained according
to the following form.

Firstly, since the older people under the papacy were educated without catechism and easily forget the parts of the Christian religion, it is deemed necessary that the minister read a section of the catechism to the people clearly and understandably before the sermon on each Sunday and on all festive days. This

is to be done in the villages and towns as well as the cities so that it is completed on nine Sundays. [There follows a division of the Catechism into nine Sundays]

Further, every Sunday afternoon at a convenient time a catechism sermon shall be delivered in the following manner. After the congregation has finished singing the minister shall first repeat the Lord's Prayer and call upon God for a right understanding of his Word, and then clearly read the 10 commandments to the people. After that he shall examine those who have not yet been able to learn the questions on which he will preach, and in an orderly fashion instruct them, first for some time on the text and thereafter step by step through the subject matter. After this let him make some of the youth recite a certain number of the questions in the catechism (which for this purpose we divided into Lord's Days), both those preceding and especially those to come next Sunday, which they have learnt before at school or at home. As soon as they have completed reciting them in the presence of the congregation, the minister shall simply and briefly interpret and explain a small number of the following questions so that he may complete the catechism preaching at least once every year.

INTRODUCTION



SCRIPTURE READINGS: *Luke 1:1–4*;
Deuteronomy 26:1–11; *1 Timothy 3:14–16*

The Heidelberg Catechism is one of the finest creeds of the Reformation period. A faithful teacher of millions, it has stood the test of time. It is still, today, one of the best tools available for learning what it means to be a Christian.

As the name suggests, the Heidelberg Catechism originated in Germany. Frederick III, the regional ruler who lived in Heidelberg in the time of the Reformation, wanted a better manual for religious instruction for his people. The result was a catechism written primarily by Zacharius Ursinus and named after the city of its origin. It was published in 1563 and was quickly—and widely—accepted.

In the third edition the Catechism was arranged under 52 divisions to correspond to the number of weeks in the year. And from that time to this, in many Reformed churches, pastors make use of this Catechism to unfold the biblical system of doctrine. The Catechism was soon translated into the Dutch language and has perhaps been loved in no other part of the church more than in the Netherlands. It has been widely accepted in many other parts of the world, however, and remains one of the most widely studied summaries of the Christian faith.

But why study a creed? Wouldn't it be better to study just the Bible? After all, creeds are manmade. The Bible is divinely inspired. Do we not dishonor God's Word if we study a catechism? This is a common conception. You even find churches today with slogans such as "No creed but the Bible." Yet the truth is that the Bible itself contradicts such thinking. We can see this very clearly from the opening words of Luke's gospel:

Inasmuch as many have taken in hand to set in order a narrative of those things which are most surely believed among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write to you an orderly account, most excellent Theophilus, that you may know the certainty of those things in which you were instructed [or “catechized,” in the Greek]. (Luke 1:1–4)

So Theophilus did not just begin with his own study of the Bible. No, he began (as we all do) by receiving instruction from others. He was catechized, in other words, and then went on to test and confirm his catechism lessons by his own study of Scripture. Notice that Luke did not regard catechetical teaching, by itself, as sufficient. No, he wanted Theophilus to “*know the certainty of those things in which [he had been] instructed.*” So the test of truth is the Bible, not the Catechism. We must always go from the Catechism to the Bible in order to make sure that it teaches the truth.

LIKE A MAP

You see, then, that the Catechism is something like a map. We could ask, “Why bother to study a map? Why not just go out and study the surface of the earth instead?” The answer, of course, is that one is wise to begin with a study of maps. After all, life is short and the world is very big. One person, working by himself, could only map a small portion of the earth’s surface. That is why maps are so valuable. They exist because many people over many years have made a study of the earth. And while these maps are not perfect, they are quite accurate. Thus, the best way to begin to understand the geography of the world is not to start with the world itself. No, the best way is to start with a good atlas. Then, after getting hold of the basics, one can go out and test the atlas by actually visiting some of the places described in it.

It is much the same with the Bible. The Bible contains a great wealth of information. It isn’t easy to master it all—in fact, no one has ever mastered it completely. It would therefore be foolish for us to try to do it on our own, starting from scratch. We would be ignoring all the study of the Word of God that other people have done down through

the centuries. That is exactly why we have creeds. They are the product of many centuries of Bible study by a great company of believers. They are a kind of spiritual “road map” of the teaching of the Bible, already worked out and proved by others before us. And, after all, isn’t this exactly what Jesus promised? When he was about to finish his work on earth, he made this promise to his disciples: “*When He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth*” (John 16:13). And Christ kept his promise. When the Day of Pentecost came, he sent his Spirit to dwell in his people. The Holy Spirit was poured out—not on individuals, each by himself, but on the whole body of Christian believers together (Acts 2). And from that time until this, he has been giving his church an understanding of the Scriptures. It is no wonder that the church expressed itself from very early times through creeds.

A LINK WITH THE PAST

One of the unique things about the Heidelberg Catechism is that it really is two creeds in one. Or, to say it differently, there is a creed within this creed. You see, a large part of this catechism (or creed) is simply a careful explanation of the Apostles’ Creed. The Apostles’ Creed is the earliest, or most ancient, creed of the church. And right here we see one of the most important things about a creed that is true to the Bible—it remains true down through the ages. It does not need to be changed again and again, with each generation, because it deals with things that are unchanging. Thus, an accurate creed binds the generations together. It reminds us that the church of Jesus Christ is not confined to one age, just as it is not confined to any one place. In other words, there is a unity in what Christians have believed, right down through the ages. Just think of it: when we confess our faith today in the words of the Apostles’ Creed, we join with all those believers who have gone before us. Does this not demonstrate that there is indeed just one Lord and one true faith?

It will be our purpose in these studies of the Heidelberg Catechism to show this again and again, by going back to the Scriptures. Our starting point will be the Catechism, but our final reference point will be the Bible. Only when we are sure that the Catechism agrees with the Word of God will we have the kind of certainty that Luke recommended to Theophilus. It will be clear from this that we must never regard the

Catechism as equal with the Bible. If my atlas says something that does not agree with what I actually find on the surface of the earth, I will not say, "The world is out of line with my atlas." No, it will be the atlas that needs correction, not the world. So it is with all creeds and confessions. We may never regard them in the same way that we regard the Bible. If the creed is out of line with the Bible at any point, we must be willing to admit it. But a wise person will be careful. He will first want to check and recheck before reaching this conclusion. The Heidelberg Catechism has been tested many times by many Christian believers who have found it true to the Scriptures. It is our hope that in these studies we can show why we firmly agree with their conclusion.

QUESTIONS ON THE LESSON

1. Explain why it is wise to begin learning the Christian faith by using a catechism.
2. How is a catechism similar to a road map?
3. What creed is explained in the Heidelberg Catechism?
4. Show from Luke 1:1–4 where we are to find our ultimate authority.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. What serious dangers exist for churches that reject the use of creeds?
2. Why is it necessary for every church to have a creed (perhaps an unwritten one), even though it claims not to have one? What happens when someone in the church teaches error?
3. If God wanted us to use creeds, why didn't he attach one on the end of the Bible? (Hint: How do creeds function in the church?)
4. Many people get bogged down reading the Bible because they don't understand its overall structure and don't know its basic teachings. How will the study of a creed alleviate this difficulty?

LORD'S DAY 1



SCRIPTURE READINGS: *Genesis 1–11*;
Hebrews 2:14–18; *Titus 2:11–14*

The Heidelberg Catechism consists of a series of 129 questions and answers. These are arranged according to a plan. The first two questions and answers are introductory. Then follow three major parts: the first (Q/A 3–11) deals with man's sin and misery; the second (Q/A 12–85) shows the way of deliverance; and the third (Q/A 86–129) unfolds the life of gratitude that is to be expected in those who are saved. In the remainder of this section we will deal with the introductory questions and answers.

1. **Q. What is your only comfort in life and death?**
 - A. That I, with body and soul, both in life and death, am not my own, but belong unto my faithful Savior Jesus Christ; who with His precious blood has fully satisfied for all my sins, and delivered me from all the power of the devil; and so preserves me that without the will of my heavenly Father not a hair can fall from my head; yea, that all things must be subservient to my salvation, wherefore by His Holy Spirit He also assures me of eternal life, and makes me heartily willing and ready, henceforth, to live unto Him.

2. **Q. How many things are necessary for you to know, that you in this comfort may live and die happily?**
 - A. Three; the first, how great my sins and misery are; the second, how I am delivered from all my sins and misery; the third, how I am to be thankful to God for such deliverance.

The Catechism begins with a question that is very important to every one of us. Whether we realize it or not, we need comfort. We need comfort because we are descendants of Adam and Eve. Being their descendants, we are (even if we are ignorant of it) in a condition of sin and misery.

If we go back to the early chapters of the Bible (chaps. 1–6 of Gen.), we read about the creation of man and then about man's fall into sin. When Adam and Eve sinned against God, profound changes occurred. God drove them out of the Garden of Eden. They became sinful in character. Sin multiplied in the world. There began to be crime and lawlessness.

The world became a dangerous place. And, in the end, whether from violence, disease, or old age, people all finally died. In other words, in just the first six chapters of the Bible, God tells us that we lost something like "heaven on earth" (in the Garden of Eden) and found ourselves in a world that began to resemble hell. We will never understand the truth about ourselves unless we take full account of what has happened. The world of today is better, in some ways, than the world was before the great Flood that finally came in Noah's day. The reason for this is that God has given some things to mankind since that time, to restrain the power of evil on earth and to moderate the misery that issues from it. For one thing, God divided the human race by causing people to speak different languages (Gen. 11).

Because of this, there is now no complete unity in the development of evil. Different nations tend to compete in different power groups, the one against the other, instead of uniting in evil. God has also put the power of the sword in the hands of civil rulers in order to restrain men in the evil they would otherwise do. It is for this reason that we have police forces and national armies and navies to deter aggression. God uses these things to restrain and limit the development of evil. And then, last but not least, God has instituted the church in the midst of the world, but distinct from it. When the church is faithful to God's holy Word, it also does much to retard the development of evil. For reasons such as these, the world is not as bad today as it was before the Flood. The first few chapters of Genesis are so very important because they teach us what happened in that period of history before God introduced these changes into the world.

At first, God permitted evil to develop to the full, we could say, so that all people in subsequent ages might know how great man's sin

and misery really are. And while we today can be very thankful that sin is somewhat restrained in the world, we also need to realize—from this scriptural data—that our human predicament is still basically a desperate one. Just stop and think of the millions of people killed in war. Think of all who have been persecuted and tortured. Think of all the suffering endured because of diseases. Think of all the crime and misery that result from it. Think of what misery it must be to spend a lifetime in prison.

These are sad realities in the world in which we are living. But they are only some of the more obvious things. Take a small town, for instance. On the surface, things may look very peaceful and pleasant. But if we knew all about the people who live there, we would soon discover serious problems in almost every household. Here is a young widow, grief-stricken because her husband was recently killed. A few doors away you have a father and mother distressed because their little infant was born with a serious abnormality. Another household is torn apart by strife between husband and wife. Still another is in great turmoil because of rebellious teenage children.

Is it any wonder that the Catechism—following the Bible—speaks of our sin and misery as it does? Yes, the truth is that our human predicament is tragic.

Yet the amazing thing is that so many people are unwilling to admit it. As a matter of fact, they do many things to keep from facing the unpleasant truth. They get drunk. They go to parties. They take drugs. They escape into the fantasy world of TV. Yet none of these diversions can change the unpleasant facts.

So our number-one need is finally to face up to our real situation—and then find the solution. That is why the Catechism says in Answer 2 that we must come to know three things if we are ever to find the solution. The first thing we need to know is the unpleasant truth about our tragic situation. Once we understand this, we can go on to learn that there is indeed a solution. The solution is the saving work accomplished by the Lord Jesus.

Now all of this is clearly stated in Q/A 2 of the Heidelberg Catechism. Here we have a comprehensive outline of the whole Catechism. This will become clear as we proceed. But first let us note that we also have—in Q/A 1—a kind of summary of everything that follows. You see, by asking “What is your only comfort?” the Catechism already makes an assumption. The assumption is that we are miserable sinners and

therefore need to find comfort. And the way we can find comfort is summarized right here in this first answer. The finished work of the Lord Jesus Christ provides exactly the comfort we need. And when we get possession of that, we will certainly be thankful for it, so much so that then we will want to live for Jesus.

Let us put it this way: What is it that makes one a Christian? Is it not the simple fact that the Christian has genuine comfort (as distinct from the many counterfeits that we see around us today)? And what is this comfort?

The answer is found in two things: what Jesus has already done for me, and what he continues to do for me. We will deal with these in greater detail later on. For now, we just want briefly to state what they are. The work that Christ has already done for me is this: He paid the price of my sin. As long as that price was not paid, I belonged to Satan. But once it was paid in full, I was no longer under Satan's control. The Bible puts it like this: *"Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage"* (Heb. 2:14–15). Christ satisfied the demands of the justice of God in order to effect this deliverance.

But there is also much that Jesus does now on behalf of his people. He exercises all authority over all things in heaven and on earth (Matt. 28:18–20). And because *"the Lord is faithful,"* he *"will establish you and guard you from the evil one"* (2 Thess. 3:3). He does this by controlling everything in the world around us and through the power of his Holy Spirit dwelling within us.

So the misery of man is great. But the work of Jesus Christ is still greater. In the midst of sorrow I can therefore rejoice. I can do this because I belong—body and soul, now and forever—to Jesus my Savior. He promised to share his inheritance with his people. This inheritance includes many things—too many to mention here—but there is one thing that must be mentioned, namely, death. As we shall see later on in these studies, Christ has conquered death. Because of this, although it is appointed to men once to die, even in death the sting is removed for believers. It does not have the power to hurt us as it can—and does—hurt those who do not have Jesus as their Savior. And when our Lord returns at the end of this age, death itself will be destroyed as he raises us up from the grave to share in his glory. The outlook, in other words,

is for a complete deliverance from all sin and from all the effects it has brought upon us. Is it any wonder that one who is given so great a salvation becomes “heartily willing and ready, henceforth, to live” for such a Redeemer? How could we do otherwise?

May God enable you to see this and experience it as you continue to listen to the lessons taught by this venerable teacher called the Heidelberg Catechism.

QUESTIONS ON THE LESSON

1. What do the three major sections of the Heidelberg Catechism deal with?
2. How is each of these three major sections implied in Q/A 1 of the Catechism?
3. Why is comfort one of our deepest needs?
4. What are some of the things that people today substitute for true comfort?
5. Why does the Christian (alone) have true comfort?

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. Many people today abhor the idea of belonging to someone. Do you think that it is good to belong to someone? To whom?
2. Do you think that God really controls *everything* that happens?
3. Is eternal life an empty religious concept?
4. Is the Devil real—or just a personification of evil?
5. Why should anyone want to live “heartily” for Jesus Christ?