

The Heidelberg Catechism

The Heidelberg Catechism of 1563 is one of the documents that the Uniting Church's Basis of Union nominates as part of the legacy the Church inherits from the Reformers. This Catechism and the other documents it nominates, serve to help us "to know or be reminded of the grace which justifies Christ's people through faith, of the centrality of the person and work of Christ the justifier, and of the need for a constant appeal to Holy Scripture."

Three truths particularly are focused on:

1. God in grace justifies Christ's people *through faith*;
2. *The person and work of Jesus as justifier*, in his incarnation, suffering, death and resurrection, is central to grace; and
3. These teachings must be *grounded in Holy Scripture*—they cannot simply be the creation of our own thinking, imagination or feeling.

A catechism is a form of teaching intended to ground new believers in the essentials of Christian faith. J. I Packer describes its purpose as:

"...the growing of God's people in the gospel, and its implications for doctrine, devotion, duty and delight."

Catechisms were used extensively in the early church, from about the 2nd to the 5th centuries AD. Many people were becoming Christians out of radically different worldviews, and catechesis was a way of helping them to process this life-revolution carefully, prayerfully, and intentionally with thorough understanding. With the acceptance and absorption of the church into the social structures of the day, the radicalness of the gospel, the utter *difference* of the kingdom of God was lost in the church's thinking and the use of catechisms dropped off for about 1000 years... until the time of the Reformation, when the radical gospel of justification by grace, through faith in Christ alone, discovered through a renewal of Biblical studies, shook things up. The need to clearly explain the gospel against the backdrop of a radically different understanding led to the revitalizing of the church's catechetical ministry. Martin Luther wrote two – a short and a long – catechisms, and instituted the particular ministry of catechist in the church. John Calvin thought catechesis essential to the church; he wrote to the Lord Protector of England, "Believe me, Monseigneur, the church of God will never be preserved without catechesis."

In our own age, there is a new movement in writing catechisms. E.g. Tim Keller has recently published one. This is something for which, I think, we should give thanks to God. We have become aware again that the gospel is *never* at home in the world, and that we, in belonging to Christ, face an environment that is hostile. At times that hostility is covert, but at times it is overt—perhaps we are entering such a time again in the Western world now. Our foolishness has been to mistake covert hostility is harmless. The real danger then is that we start to mistake the surrounding culture and worldview for a Gospel culture and worldview, and to forget that the gospel is always alien in our world; my thoughts are not your thoughts, says the LORD. Perhaps strong catechesis in times of *peace* would be a good measure!

One feature of Reformation churches was catechetical preaching at Sunday afternoon services, over the course of a year. It was this that led to the particular structure of the Heidelberg Catechism. Written by the faculty of the University of Heidelberg, led by Zacharius Ursinus, under the direction of the Prince Elector, Frederick III, the final form of the catechism is a series of 129 questions and answers, arranged into 52 blocks, called "Lord's Days." The intention was that each of these blocks would provide the content for the Sunday preaching at the afternoon service over the course of a year.

The catechism worked by a series of 129 questions and answers, each with supporting Scripture for the source of the answer. The answers were to be learned by rote by the catechumens, but also to be meditated on and preached on in more depth. "Doctrine, devotion, duty and delight"—these implications of the gospel provide the content of the Heidelberg Catechism. The first Lord's Day sets out the purpose of the whole project, and then the remaining Lord's Days are set out in three large blocks. LDs 2-4 deal with the misery of humanity; LDs 5-31 with the deliverance of humanity from our misery; and LDs 32-

52 with the gratitude due from humanity for such a gracious deliverance.

The Basis of Union urges us (especially our pastors and ministers) to give attention to the Catechism for three reasons—to be reminded of the truth of justification by grace through faith; to know afresh the centrality of Jesus Christ in his person and work as the Justifier, and to be reminded of the need for a constant appeal to Scripture. The Catechism does all this.

It is solidly grounded in Scripture; no statement is made without an appeal to Scripture to support it. The Catechism is a testament that the gospel and Christian life is not a matter for our own devising. God has spoken in His Son, and the Scriptures as a whole are a testimony to that revelation. The Catechism, with its rote learning of answers, really stands against our age, where feelings and personal opinions are seen as ultimately authoritative for a person. Nowhere in the Catechism is an answer prefaced with *I like to think of God as—*.

Reading the Catechism, a reader today may be struck with the very strong tone of the document. Matters of sin, depravity, judgment, and others are spoken of directly and without apology—in the way that the Scriptures do. E.g. Q8: But are we so corrupt that we are totally unable to do any good and inclined toward all evil? *A. Yes, unless we are born again by the Spirit of God.* The Catechism sees very clearly that without an understanding of our *sin and misery*, the greatness of the Gospel will be underestimated. It is not *overly focused* on this truth (it is covered in LDs 2-4) but it understands this to be foundational.

The whole thrust of the Catechism is to know the comfort of the gospel in life and in death. This is true comfort, to know (Q1) that I am not my own, but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood, and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil. He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven; in fact, all things must work together for my salvation. Because I belong to him, Christ, by his Holy Spirit, assures me of eternal life and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.

The second, and largest, section of the Catechism deals with the action of God in Jesus Christ to deliver us from our sin and misery. This section deals firstly with a discussion on the need for a mediator, one who is both human and divine to deliver us from the judgment of God and to restore us to His favour. This Saviour is Jesus Christ—and his saving work is enjoyed by those who have a true faith in him. A true faith (Q21) is not only a sure knowledge and assent to the Scriptures, but also a wholehearted, personal trust, created by the Holy Spirit through the message of the gospel, that God, for the sake of Jesus Christ, has forgiven my sins, declared me righteous eternally, and saved me.

The Apostles Creed is given as a summary of all that the gospel teaches (Q22-58), all the way through asking repeatedly, How does this benefit you? How does this comfort you? After setting this all out, Q59 asks, What good does it do you, however, to believe all this? The answer? In Christ I am righteous before God and heir to life everlasting. That is, the Apostles Creed is primarily seen as a summary of the radical gospel, that bring the righteousness of faith. Against all the accusations of my conscience (Q60) as it remembers my many sins and of my still being inclined toward evil, nevertheless, *without any merit of my own, out of sheer grace, God grants and credits to me the perfect – righteousness and holiness of Christ, as if I had never sinned nor been a sinner, as if I had been perfectly obedient as Christ was obedient for me.*

There are some today who criticize this kind of thinking as being morbidly introspective, and as being irrelevant in an age which is not so much a *guilt culture* as a *shame culture*. Such a criticism thinks that the need for today is not so much a focus on justification as on acceptance (by self and by others.) Such thinking fails to see the deep connection between guilt and shame that the Scriptures portray. The shame of humanity at the end of Genesis 3 is real, but it issues from the reality of guilt, of a change in the relationship between God and humanity that our disobedience caused. The Scriptures see no possibility of the end of shame without the dealing with the deeper problem of sin and guilt. And the glory of it all is that this is what the gospel tells us— what we have no possibility of doing, God has done freely in grace for us in His Son.

