

# *The Heidelberg Catechism*

*The Heidelberg Catechism was written in Heidelberg at the request of Elector Frederick III, ruler of the most influential German province, the Palatinate, from 1559 to 1576. This pious Christian prince commissioned Zacharius Ursinus, twenty-eight years of age and professor of theology at the Heidelberg University, and Caspar Olevianus, twenty-six years old and Frederick's court preacher, to prepare a catechism for instructing the youth and for guiding pastors and teachers. Frederick obtained the advice and cooperation of the entire theological faculty in the preparation of the Catechism. The Heidelberg Catechism was adopted by a Synod in Heidelberg and published in German with a preface by Frederick III, dated January 19, 1563. A second and third German edition, each with some small additions, as well as a Latin translation were published in Heidelberg in the same year. The Catechism was soon divided into fifty-two sections, so that a section of the Catechism could be explained to the churches each Sunday of the year.*

*In The Netherlands this Heidelberg Catechism became generally and favourably known almost as soon as it came from the press, mainly through the efforts of Petrus Dathenus, who translated it into the Dutch language and added this translation to his Dutch rendering of the Genevan Psalter, which was published in 1566. In the same year Peter Gabriel set the example of explaining this catechism to his congregation at Amsterdam in his Sunday afternoon sermons. The National Synods of the sixteenth century adopted it as one of the confessional standards, along with the Belgic Confession requiring office-bearers to subscribe to it and ministers to explain it to the churches. These requirements were strongly emphasized by the great Synod of Dort in 1618-19. A very nice history of the origin of both confessional standard is available in *Three Men Came to Heidelberg & Glorious Heretic* by Thea Van Halsema, also published by Inheritance Publications. The Heidelberg Catechism has been translated into many languages and is the most influential and the most generally accepted of the several catechisms of Reformation times.*

## *Lord's Day 1*

*1. Q. What is your only comfort  
in life and death?*

*A. That I am not my own,<sup>1</sup>  
but belong with body and soul,  
both in life and in death,<sup>2</sup>  
to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ.<sup>3</sup>  
He has fully paid for all my sins  
with His precious blood,<sup>4</sup>  
and has set me free  
from all the power of the devil.<sup>5</sup>  
He also preserves me in such a way<sup>6</sup>  
that without the will of my heavenly Father  
not a hair can fall from my head;<sup>7</sup>  
indeed, all things must work together  
for my salvation.<sup>8</sup>  
Therefore, by His Holy Spirit  
He also assures me  
of eternal life<sup>9</sup>  
and makes me heartily willing and ready  
from now on to live for Him.<sup>10</sup>*

*2. Q. What do you need to know  
in order to live and die  
in the joy of this comfort?*

*A. First,  
how great my sins and misery are;<sup>1</sup>  
second,  
how I am delivered  
from all my sins and misery;<sup>2</sup>  
third,  
how I am to be thankful to God  
for such deliverance.<sup>3</sup>*

<sup>1</sup> I Cor. 6:19, 20.

<sup>2</sup> Rom. 14:7-9.

<sup>3</sup> I Cor. 3:23; Tit. 2:14.

<sup>4</sup> I Pet. 1:18, 19; I John 1:7; 2:2.

<sup>5</sup> John 8:34-36; Heb. 2:14, 15; I John 3:8.

<sup>6</sup> John 6:39, 40; 10:27-30; II Thess. 3:3; I Pet. 1:5.

<sup>7</sup> Matt. 10:29-31; Luke 21:16-18.

<sup>8</sup> Rom. 8:28.

<sup>9</sup> Rom. 8:15, 16; II Cor. 1:21, 22; 5:5; Eph. 1:13, 14.

<sup>10</sup> Rom. 8:14.

<sup>1</sup> Rom. 3:9, 10; I John 1:10.

<sup>2</sup> John 17:3; Acts 4:12; 10:43.

<sup>3</sup> Matt. 5:16; Rom. 6:13; Eph. 5:8-10; I Pet. 2:9, 10.

## LORD'S DAY 1

### THE ONLY COMFORT OF THE CHURCH

Text: Lord's Day 1  
Reading: Isaiah 40 : 1-11

Hymn 11 : 1, 3  
Hymn 5 : 1, 2  
Psalm 116 : 1, 5, 10  
Psalm 130 : 4  
Hymn 49 : 1, 2

Introduction: Beloved congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ,

We begin again with the first Lord's Day of the "old Heidelberg". And indeed, the Heidelberg Catechism is an old book. Some would say it is an antiquated document. After all, it was first published in 1563, more than 400 years ago. The question which comes up is: can such an ancient document still serve today as confession and instruction manual of the Church?

Does this old catechism not reflect the dated insights and ideas of its own period, the turbulent age of the great Reformation? Should we today in our age still bother with it, and even demand "catechism preaching" from it, Sunday after Sunday? Has the world not changed since then and are the present times not different? Have we not progressed in our thinking and understanding? Are the issues today not vastly different than in the sixteenth century? What did they know then about matters with which we are faced in the atomic age?

If we wrote a catechism today, would it not address different questions than the ones discussed in the Heidelberg Catechism? We need not be surprised, then, that many churches (also "reformed churches") today no longer demand or maintain regular catechism preaching. We are told that both the method of catechism preaching and the text of the Catechism are outdated.

However, one of the amazing features of the Heidelberg Catechism is that even though it is "old", it

is certainly not "outdated". Since the time of the Reformation, the Heidelberg Catechism has shown a remarkable durability. The reason is that it is not a book containing human opinions, but a book which puts forward a scriptural confession!

No, the Heidelberg Catechism is not an infallible document, and therefore it has been subject to revision and can always be changed. Still we accept it [as Reformed churches] as a faithful confession of the doctrine of the Scriptures. The Church has found in the Heidelberg Catechism a true and wonderful summary of the living Word of God. That is the value and function of the Heidelberg Catechism, also today!

With this faithful confession, we may and we can tackle the issues and problems of today. We may explain this scriptural confession in a scriptural manner and apply it concretely to our lives today. If we do that then also the catechism preaching is fully the proclamation of God's Word!

As we turn to Lord's Day 1, we are struck again by the beauty of this introductory Lord's Day. Lord's Day 1 summarizes the contents of the entire Catechism and introduces a word which will resurface time and again, namely, the word comfort. The first question sets the tone for the whole book. It asks: "What is your only comfort in life and death?" The Catechism will constantly inquire as to what extent and in what way something benefits or comforts us. In a special way, the Catechism has become known as the book of "the only comfort". I summarize this Lord's Day as follows:

## **The Gospel of Jesus Christ concerning the only comfort of the Church.**

### **1. the certainty expressed concerning the reality of this comfort**

### **2. the knowledge required for the joy of this comfort.**

1. I once read somewhere the remark (in *Homiletica*, Vol. I, page 57, by J.G. Woelderink) that we should not place too much emphasis on the word “comfort”, since the writers of the Catechism could easily have chosen another word. The choice or use of the word “comfort” is thus considered purely coincidental and of secondary importance.

The writers could indeed have chosen another word, but the fact is they didn't! They chose to use this word: comfort. Perhaps they were led to this word in part by the dire circumstances of the times, for there was widespread unrest and much persecution in those days. But the word is also a biblical word and the concept of comfort is a scriptural one! And that is of great interest to us!

The word “comfort” literally means something with which to strengthen yourself or in which to be strengthened. The word “comfort” presupposes pain, grief, tribulation, and affliction. And “comfort” is then not a matter of uttering a few words of consolation, but “comfort” is meant as something which brings real and lasting relief, which lifts you up and over, which really changes the present situation and gives hope for the future.

Now perhaps you know by experience that it is not easy to offer comfort. Neither is it easy to find comfort. What people say to us or do for us in our difficulties often affords us only small comfort. When it comes to comfort, many people become cynical and say, “Where can a person find real comfort?” The situation in this world is that no real comfort can be found.

For many people comfort is not a reality about which they have certainty; it is rather a quest about which they have great fears. But the Heidelberg Catechism speaks in no uncertain terms! There is a comfort. The Catechism even speaks of an only comfort—and here “only” is meant in the sense of “unique” or

“exclusive”. This is a comfort which is peculiar to the Church and which belongs only to believers! You will not find this comfort anywhere else except with God's people!

I find it striking that everything here in Lord's Day 1 is so positive. There is not a shred of doubt. We are not speaking here about a remote possibility of salvation. We don't say: “my comfort is that God may or might one day save me.” No, we are here confessing a reality: I belong to Jesus Christ. He has paid. He has set me free. He also preserves me. All this is solid, and you can, as it were, sink your teeth into it and grab hold of it. It is not a guessing game. No, it's a confessed reality!

This immediately sets the tone for the whole catechism. Sometimes we as Reformed people are told that we take our salvation too much for granted. It is said that we “appropriate” salvation much too quickly. It all goes so “easy” with us, and we attend the Lord's Supper much too easily. Well, we must indeed be careful of a wrong attitude here, for these matters must be a matter of the heart and not of custom alone. But Lord's Day 1 (and the rest) is the confession of the Church and of all its members, and all these members, who are required to be living members, confess with certainty the reality of their salvation in Christ Jesus!

For this reality of salvation does not lie in any way in ourselves. It lies only in Christ! This is the key point here and throughout the catechism. Because salvation lies in Christ, it is real and it is certain. I am always afraid that among those who would accuse us of being too easy and too quick in appropriating salvation, the emphasis lies too much on what we feel and find in ourselves, and that what we have in Christ is therefore obscured!

The Catechism does not here use a bold and a rash tone, as if we are appropriating what does not belong to us. The Catechism is simply summarizing what the Word of God tells us in no uncertain terms, namely, that in Christ there is for all believers a fullness of redemption and that we are to take hold of it!

When the word “comfort” is used in the Bible, it is used to describe reconciliation and the removal of the curse. It means restoration of life. That is always the

context. I think now particularly of the prophecy we read from Isaiah 40. There the LORD speaks to the exiles who have been banished from the land of Israel for their sins: “Comfort, comfort my people, speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins”.

There is no more war between God and His people, for there is forgiveness of sins. The curse has been taken away and all must now be made ready for the restoration of Israel. See verses 10 and 11: “Behold, the LORD comes with might . . . His reward is with Him, He will feed His flock like a shepherd, He will gather the lambs in His arms”.

The concrete content of the comfort is: forgiveness of sins, removal of the curse, and restoration of life. All this comes upon God’s initiative, through God’s power and is to God’s glory. That is the prophecy of Isaiah 40 concerning the “only comfort”.

And we know that this prophecy finds its fulfillment in Christ Jesus. For this prophecy is taken up by John the Baptist as he prepares Israel for the coming of the Messiah and as he witnesses of the Christ as the lamb of God Who takes away the sins of the world. In Christ there is forgiveness of sins, removal of the curse, and restoration of life. In this first Lord’s Day the Church confesses what it has in Christ Jesus, according to the Scriptures.

It is put here in such a simple and yet profound manner: “I am not my own, but belong with body and soul, both in life and death, to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ.” I belong completely to Jesus Christ. The expression “body and soul” means: in my totality as a human being, as a person, physically and spiritually. Jesus Christ has all the rights to my life, and He also takes the full responsibility for my life.

He has earned the rights to my life by paying for all my sins with His own precious blood. He fulfils the responsibility for my life by placing me in the care of His heavenly Father, the Almighty, and by giving me His Holy Spirit so that I may live for Him. It is Jesus Christ Who applies to us and works out in us the power of the Triune God!

I belong to Jesus Christ—it is a great reality. I do not have to do it on my own. I am not left to myself. I am not in the power of the evil one, but in the hands of a loving Shepherd. Notice how the Catechism emphasizes that Christ has set me free from “all the power of the devil”. All the power? Is that not a bit too positive or too jubilant? Does not Satan in fact still have much power in our lives, causing us to sin? Indeed, Satan does influence our lives to sin, but he has no control over us. He cannot determine our destiny or regulate the outcome of our life.

Therefore I may even say, “. . . all things must work together for my salvation”. We are in God’s hands in this life, and also when death comes, we are inseparable from the love of God in Christ Jesus! Even the devil must in the end admit that God used all things for our eternal benefit. The world will see that the believers will inherit the earth.

We confess the redeeming work of the Son, the preserving care of the Father, and the renewing power of the Holy Spirit. We belong to Christ. We are not hanging in the air, unattached, but we belong to Christ, Who applies to us the fullness of God’s grace. This is my only and my very special comfort. With this comfort I can tackle life, weather all storms, bear all burdens, and overcome all disappointments. This is what makes me strong, fills me with hope, for to me this is not a dream, but reality; it is not a possibility, but a certainty. I do belong to Jesus Christ, my faithful Saviour.

This is the tone of our Catechism and the level of faith of our confession. Here is where the faint heart is strengthened. We may again explore the vast expanse and the thrilling depths of that confession in fifty-two Lord’s Days. But we always do so in certainty of our only comfort. And so we may daily experience the joy of this comfort. We come to the second point.

2. In the first question and answer the Catechism has given us a theme, but we understand that a theme needs elaboration. It needs to be worked out and explained.

And so the second question is: “What do you need to know in order to live and die in the joy of this com-

fort?" In the joy of this comfort, it says. An older version has: ". . . that in this comfort we may live and die happily".

It is obvious that this comfort gives us great joy and true happiness. Let us first agree already at Lord's Day 1, that our confession is a happy confession and our faith is joyous! I once heard someone say that he found the "Reformed faith" rather depressing and the Reformed church services rather uninspiring—long, dull sermons on what not to do—but such a person has not understood a thing of the true reformed confession. We have the most happy and joyous faith of all! This is not always measured by the exuberant and emotional responses of men, but this is determined by the contents of our faith!

The joy of something can easily be taken away. We can begin something with much enthusiasm and initial happiness, but when we are tried or when disappointments come, our joy begins to fade away. So it can also be with our faith, our comfort. I think of what the Lord Jesus Himself said in explaining the parable of the sower (Matthew 13). Speaking about the seed sown on rocky ground, Jesus said: "He hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a little while—and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away" (13:21). There is initial joy, but soon it disappears. There is no depth, no growth in the faith. The seed does not take root.

And again, when the Catechism was written, there was much tribulation and persecution. Many who joyously embraced the reformed faith would have to pay for it dearly, in the way of losing possessions, becoming fugitives, and perhaps even dying as martyrs. Where then is the joy of this comfort?

The Catechism says that we cannot suffice here with a simple theme, but must rather dig deeper. We have a happy and joyous confession, but if we are to live and die in the joy of this comfort, that is, if we are to retain our joy under all circumstances, we must have a certain knowledge, a necessary knowledge!

The Catechism emphasizes knowledge. We might have expected something else, for instance that to live

and die in the joy of this comfort we need faith, love, hope, self-denial, sacrifice etc. The Catechism does not deny that we need all those things, but stresses knowledge. What do you need to know? There are things which we truly need to know if we are to live and die happily.

Knowledge. Let us not misunderstand this word. It is important to stress that this knowledge is not just a matter of knowing a few facts. It is not a matter of learning a few things by heart. We call that "memorizing", the affliction of a catechism student! Knowledge means having these things in your heart! In the Bible "to know" is always to know intimately, by faith, with all your heart! To know is to be involved with your entire person and so to experience.

The Catechism does not mean here that we should know a few facts, only a minimum of facts. Then the answer would be: I must know that my sins and misery are great, that I am delivered and that I am to be thankful. But it says that I must know how great my sins and misery are, how I am delivered, and how I am to be thankful for such a deliverance!

Not the mere fact "that" but the exact "how". We must know how—the inner workings, the greater depths. That is necessary knowledge for Christians who wish to survive in the faith!

Let me illustrate this briefly. Many people will admit that they are not perfect. But still they do not have an inkling of how great their sins and misery really are and how deeply they have grieved God with their evil. Consequently their sins do not bother them much. They may know something about a Saviour, Jesus, but exactly why He had to come and how He saved us, they do not know. They probably don't really care much about the issue. Just as their sins do not bother them, so the Saviour does not interest them. And they may know that they should somehow "serve" God, but please do not ask them for details, because then they become rather evasive. How to be thankful for such deliverance—for that wondrous salvation—is beyond them!

So we get a superficial Christianity which doesn't really know at all, and when it comes "to the crunch"

simply drops away and drops out. The initial enthusiasm and the first joy is soon gone.

The Catechism says: if we are to keep the joy of this comfort and live every day in the happiness of salvation, then we will have to know-how, not just know-that but know-how, not only in the head, but also with the heart! Therefore the catechism sermon remains important and the second service, in which as a rule the catechism sermon is delivered, is very valuable for the Church. Catechism preaching prevents the Church from becoming superficial. It forces us to attend to the whole doctrine of salvation and not just to some parts. Faithful catechism preaching prevents superficial Christianity, for it forces us to dig deeply into the riches of the Christian faith. It has such great consequences for our lives.

If we continue to see the terrible character of our sins and misery, we will be amazed at the wonderful miracle of deliverance. How God worked this out in Christ will never cease to amaze us. And then we will also rise time and again to show true thankfulness for such a great salvation. Only then will we give God the service He deserves and desires. And then we will study His Word unceasingly in order to grow in wisdom, obedience and holiness!

Then as we grow in this necessary knowledge, our joy is deepened, our joy in that unique comfort. More and more we see the ruin caused by our sins. But also the great restoration in Christ! More and more we receive pleasure in the new service of God. Also when tribulations and even persecutions come, our joy remains—joy in that unique comfort that we belong in life and death to Jesus Christ, our Lord.

So we are going through it again, through the “old Heidelberg” with the message that is always “new”. We go through it looking for the things we need to know in order to retain our Christian joy in a sad and dark world. We go through it in order to grow in knowledge and in the certainty of the “only comfort”. We’ll dig into it again, all fifty-two Lord’s Days, so that our faith is deepened and our joy remains and so that in all the trials of life we never lose our Christian hope.

The Heidelberg Catechism has a beautiful theme: the only comfort. It also has a beautiful division: our misery, our deliverance and our gratitude. You find the same in Psalm 130. Our misery: “out of the depths of sadness”. Our deliverance: Thou dost pardon fully all our iniquity. Our gratitude: that they His praise may tell.

*We will go through all this again so that we never lose the certainty and the joy of faith! AMEN.*