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Introduction: Hide-and-Seek and the Heidelberg

The only thing more difficult than finding the truth is not losing it. What starts out as new and precious becomes plain and old. What begins a thrilling discovery becomes a rote exercise. What provokes one generation to sacrifice and passion becomes in the next generation a cause for rebellion and apathy. Why is it that denominations and church movements almost always drift from their theological moorings? Why is it that people who grow up in the church are often less articulate about their faith than the new Christian who converted at forty-five? Why is it that those who grow up with creeds and confessions are usually the ones who hate them most?

Perhaps it's because truth is like the tip of your nose—it's hardest to see when it's right in front of you.

No doubt, the church in the West has many new things to learn. But for the most part, everything we need to learn is what we've already forgotten. The chief theological task now facing the Western church is not to reinvent or to be relevant but to remember. We must remember the old, old story. We must remember the faith once delivered to the saints. We must remember the truths that spark reformation, revival, and regeneration.

And because we want to remember all this, we must also remember—if we are fortunate enough to have ever heard of them in the first place—our creeds, confessions, and catechisms.

Your reaction to that last sentence probably falls in one of three categories. Some people, especially the young, believe it or not, will think, “Cool. Ancient faith. I’m into creeds and confessions.” Others will think, “Wait a minute, don’t Catholics have catechisms? Why do we need some man-made document to tell us what to think? I have no creed but the Bible, thank you very much.” And yet others—the hardest soil of all—want nothing more than to be done with all this catechism business. “Been there, done that. *Bor-ing*. I’ve seen people who knew their creeds backward and forward and didn’t make them missional, passionate, or even very nice.”

To all three groups I simply say, “Come and see.” Come and see what vintage faith is really all about. Come and see if the cool breeze from centuries gone by can awaken your lumbering faith. Come and see if your church was lame *because* of its confessions and catechisms or if your lame church *made* the confessions and catechisms lame all on its own. Whether you’ve grown up with confessions and catechisms or they sound like something from another spiritual planet, I say, “Come and see.” Come and see Christ in the unlikeliest of places—in a manger, in Nazareth, or even in Heidelberg.

BETTER THAN YOU MIGHT THINK (Not as Bad as You Remember)

I love the Heidelberg Catechism, not like I love my wife or I love the Bible, but in a deeper way than I love the Chicago Bears and a more eternal way than I love a good deep-dish pizza. “Love” and “Catechism” are not two words usually heard together, unless it’s something like “I love that my church doesn’t make kids learn catechism anymore.” Nevertheless, I freely confess I love the Heidelberg Catechism. I love it because it’s old, it’s biblical, and it’s true. It’s not perfect. It’s not infallible. It says too little about some subjects and too much about some others. But it is through and through trustworthy and beautiful, simple and deep. Most of all, I love the Heidelberg Catechism because I love the gospel it expounds and the salvation it proclaims.

I grew up with the Heidelberg. I don’t recall having to memorize it cold like some organic chemistry nightmare. It wasn’t front and center in my life,

but it was there. I'll forever be grateful to my childhood pastor for making me read the Heidelberg Catechism and meet in his office with him to talk about it before I made a profession of faith in the fourth grade. I was nervous to meet with him, even more nervous to meet before all the elders. But both meetings were pleasant. And besides, I was forced to read through all 129 questions and answers at age nine. That was a blessing I didn't realize at the time. Ever since then I've had a copy of the Catechism and have grown to understand it and cherish it more and more over the years.

Not everyone is as keen on catechism as I am. For some, catechisms are too linear, too systematic, too propositional. For others, the catechism gets a bad rap because, fairly or unfairly, the only stories that we hear about catechetical instruction are the stories of old Domine VanderSo-and-so who threatened to smite us hip and thigh if we couldn't remember what God required of us in the Eighth Commandment. More often, catechisms simply never get tried because they are said to be about theology, and theology is said to be boring . . . and words like "Heidelberg" and "Westminster" are even more boring. (Incidentally, I have never been a fan of snazzy Sunday school curriculum that tries to pretend that a catechism is something other than questions and answers about the Bible. You can call it "Journeys with God from the Palatinate" or "Heidelberg Truth Rockets" but it's still a catechism, and our kids know it.)

But even with all this bad press, I think the Catechism can make a comeback. All of us—kids and adults—need to know the Bible better than we know the Heidelberg Catechism. No doubt about that. But all of us—kids and adults—can have our faith strengthened, our knowledge broadened, and our love for Jesus deepened by devoting ourselves to reading rich truth like the kind found in the Heidelberg Catechism. I'll never forget sitting in my Christian education class at my evangelical, non-Dutch, nondenominational seminary. One of our assigned texts was the Heidelberg Catechism—this little book that growing up was usually good for rolling the eyes of students into the backs of their little heads. But my fellow students at seminary marveled at this piece of work. "Where has this been all our lives?" "This will be perfect for Sunday school!" "I'm going to use this for new members' classes!" Most of the Dutch Reformed kids I knew were ready to see the Heidelberg Catechism go the way of the

dodo bird. But at seminary, my classmates were seeing something many of my peers had missed. The Heidelberg Catechism is really, really good.

PURPOSE-DRIVEN TRUTH

In 1562, Elector Frederick III of the Palatinate, a princely state of the Holy Roman Empire (think Germany), ordered the preparation of a new catechism for his territory. A new catechism would serve three purposes: (1) as a tool for teaching children, (2) as a guide for preachers, and (3) as a form for confessional unity among the Protestant factions in the Palatinate. Frederick wanted a unifying catechism that avoided theological labels and was plainly rooted in the texts of Scripture. To that end, he commissioned a team of theological professors and ministers (along with Frederick himself) to draft a new catechism. Although the catechism was truly a team effort (including Caspar Olevianus who used to be considered a coauthor of the catechism, but now is seen as simply one valuable member of the committee), there is little doubt the chief author was Zacharias Ursinus.

Ursinus, a professor at the University in Heidelberg, was born on July 18, 1534, in what is today Poland but at that time was part of Austria. Ursinus was the chief architect of the Heidelberg Catechism, basing many of the questions and answers on his own shorter catechism, and to a lesser extent, his larger catechism. The Heidelberg Catechism reflects Ursinus's theological convictions (firmly Protestant with Calvinist leanings) and his warm, irenic spirit.¹

This new catechism was first published in Heidelberg (the leading city of the Palatinate) in January 1563, going through several revisions that same year. The Catechism was quickly translated into Latin and Dutch, and soon after into French and English. Besides the Bible, John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, and Thomas à Kempis' *Imitation of Christ*, the Heidelberg Catechism is the most widely circulated book in the world. Since its publication in 1563, the Heidelberg Catechism has been used in scores of languages and is widely praised as the most devotional, most loved catechism of the Reformation.²

Like most catechisms, the Heidelberg Catechism is largely a

commentary on three things: the Apostle's Creed, the Ten Commandments, and the Lord's Prayer. Heidelberg's structure, however, is unique in two ways. First, the overall structure fits into the pattern of salvation found in the book of Romans. After two introductory questions, the Catechism deals with man's misery (Questions 3–11), man's deliverance (12–85), and finally, man's response (86–129)—or to put it more memorably: guilt, grace, and gratitude. Second, the Heidelberg Catechism's 129 questions and answers are divided into fifty-two Lord's Days. Besides making it easy to preach from the Catechism (one of its original purposes), this division also makes the Catechism convenient for family devotions every Sunday or personal catechetical reflection once a week.

YEAR OF THE HEIDELBERG

Not too long ago I devoted an entire year to studying the Heidelberg Catechism. In lieu of my usual monthly church newsletter, I decided to try weekly devotions on the Heidelberg Catechism. Jesus' words about counting the cost came to mind more than once before launching such an undertaking. Would I really make the time—at least three hours a week—to jot down my musings on a 450-year-old catechism? And would anybody read them if I did? I mean, Heidelberg's good, but it's not exactly *Lord of the Rings*. In the end, I'm convinced it was a good undertaking, worth the time and commitment. More seemed to read the devotionals than I thought, and some dear saints made their own binders and faithfully picked up their Lord's Day reading every week in the lobby.

Just as importantly, the Heidelberg Catechism has been good for me. My own personal assessment of my pastoral ministry is that over the past two or three years the gospel has become much more central. Not that I didn't know the gospel or didn't believe or preach the gospel before. But recently, I have taken more delight in the gospel, stayed more focused on the gospel, and made the gospel more explicit in my ministry. The Heidelberg Catechism is partly to thank for this renewed passion. In a church age confused about the essential elements of the Christian faith—and whether Christianity has any doctrinal center at all—the Heidelberg Catechism offers a relentless reminder of the one doctrine that matters most:

We are great sinners and Christ is a greater Savior. I wouldn't have spent a year in the Catechism if I didn't think that doing so would help me know the Bible better and love Jesus more. Mercifully, I believe my year of the Heidelberg did just that.

Those cheery thoughts notwithstanding, I must add that I am saddened to think of how many Christians—Protestants, evangelicals, and Reformed Christians in particular—are blissfully unaware of this treasure right under their noses. I am even more disappointed to think of pastors and professors in the Reformed tradition (and here I'm thinking of mushy mainliners and atheological practitioners) who have been instructed in the Catechism and simply don't cherish the truths it proclaims.

But I'm also optimistic to think how the Spirit might work if a new generation of children, students, pastors, and regular Christian folk thrilled to the gospel so elegantly and logically laid out in the Heidelberg Catechism. The Heidelberg Catechism is simple enough for children and new believers and for anyone who wants a better grounding for his faith. It's also deep enough to pull longtime Christians past the sentimental platitudes and "deeds not creeds" neoliberalism that passes for evangelical spirituality and into cleaner, healthier waters. I daresay the Catechism can even be used evangelistically as a clearheaded, warmhearted explanation of the Christian faith.

A LABOR OF LOVE

I have been privileged to have a few books published before this one. And while I loved working on all of them and trust they all were of some help to the church, none of them warmed my soul and drew me closer to God like this one. This book may not seem as timely and I doubt royalty sales will cause me to seek out tax-sheltered annuities, but that's not why Christians should write books anyway. I wrote this book so that others might be drawn into the same gospel ocean that has refreshed me. The gospel summarized in the Heidelberg Catechism is glorious, its Christ gracious, its comfort rich, its Spirit strong, its God sovereign, and its truth timeless. You can meet Christ here, if you will simply come and see.

If you've ever found understanding the Bible a bit like exploring Amer-

ica on foot, interesting but overwhelming and slow-going, why not use the Heidelberg Catechism as a map? The Catechism can help show you the main attractions others have discovered in the Bible and lead you to the best, most important truths of our faith.³ As the saying goes (to change our metaphors once again), you can see farther when standing on the shoulders of giants. And the Heidelberg Catechism is a giant of mind-sharpening, Christ-worshipping, soul-inspiring devotion. Stand on its shoulders and see more of Christ who saves us from our guilt by His grace and makes us, through His Spirit, wholeheartedly willing and ready to live for Him.

Lord's Day 1

1. Q. WHAT IS YOUR ONLY COMFORT IN LIFE AND IN DEATH?⁴

A. 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.

2. Q. WHAT MUST YOU KNOW TO LIVE AND DIE IN THE JOY OF THIS COMFORT?

A. Three things: first, how great my sin and misery are; second, how I am set free from all my sins and misery; third, how I am to thank God for such deliverance.