

*In the*  
MIDST  
*of*  
DEATH

## **The Triple Knowledge Series**

**Volume 1 *In the Midst of Death***

**Volume 2 *God's Way Out***

**Volume 3 *The Death of the Son of God***

**Volume 4 *The Lord of Glory***

**Volume 5 *Abundant Mercy***

**Volume 6 *Baptized into Christ***

**Volume 7 *Eating and Drinking Christ***

**Volume 8 *Love the Lord Thy God***

**Volume 9 *Love Thy Neighbor for God's Sake***

**Volume 10 *The Perfect Prayer***

*In the*  
MIDST  
*of*  
DEATH

AN EXPOSITION OF THE  
HEIDELBERG CATECHISM

Second Edition



**The Triple Knowledge Series - Volume 1**

HERMAN HOEKSEMA



REFORMED  
FREE PUBLISHING  
ASSOCIATION  
Jenison, Michigan

©2015 Reformed Free Publishing Association

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©1970 Reformed Free Publishing Association published in volume 1  
of *The Triple Knowledge: An Exposition of the Heidelberg Catechism*

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Unless otherwise noted, the quotations of the Heidelberg Catechism are taken from *The Confessions and the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville, MI: Protestant Reformed Churches in America, 2005)

Cover design by Gary Gore Book Design

Interior design by Katherine Lloyd, The DESK

Reformed Free Publishing Association

1894 Georgetown Center Drive

Jenison, Michigan 49428

616-457-5970

[www.rfpa.org](http://www.rfpa.org)

ISBN 978-1-936054-56-5

ISBN 10-volume set 978-1-936054-83-1

ISBN ebook 978-1-936054-57-2

LCCN 2014956610

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## PUBLISHER'S FOREWORD TO *THE TRIPLE KNOWLEDGE SERIES*

Herman Hoeksema originally wrote his exposition of the Heidelberg Catechism as a lengthy series of articles in the *Standard Bearer*, a magazine published by the Reformed Free Publishing Association. The introductory article appeared in volume 17, issue 19, July 1, 1941, and the explanation of Lord's Day 1 began in volume 17, issue 21.

These articles appeared regularly in the *Standard Bearer* until they abruptly ceased in July 1947 when the author suffered a severe stroke. On June 1, 1948, after a lengthy recovery, Hoeksema resumed writing. The articles continued until he finished his explanation of Lord's Day 52 in volume 32, issue 16, May 13, 1956.

As these articles were written in the *Standard Bearer*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company published the material in a ten-volume set of books with the following titles: *In the Midst of Death, God's Way Out, The Death of the Son of God, The Lord of Glory, Abundant Mercy, Baptized into Christ, Eating and Drinking Christ, Love the Lord Thy God, Love Thy Neighbor for God's Sake*, and *The Perfect Prayer*.

From 1970 to 1972 the Reformed Free Publishing Association published the same material in three volumes titled *The Triple Knowledge: An Exposition of the Heidelberg Catechism*.

Because these books are out of print and because of their

value for God's people, the Reformed Free Publishing Association decided to edit Hoeksema's exposition and publish it in the original ten-volume format. The content is essentially unchanged, and the revisions are strictly formal to bring the books into conformity with today's publishing standards.

Of historical interest is an accurate description of the author and his work on the dust jacket of the first volume, *In the Midst of Death*, likely furnished by the publisher in 1943.

Rev. Herman Hoeksema stands out today as one of the greatest theologians among those who adhere to the Reformed faith. He has faithfully preached from the Heidelberg Catechism for more than twenty-seven years, and now he presents this volume as the beginning of a scholarly new exposition of this sound, organized study of the great doctrines of holy scripture.

The method of instruction in Christian religion called the Heidelberg Catechism has been held in high esteem by the Reformed churches throughout Europe for several centuries. This high estimation has quite naturally carried over into the American branches of the Reformed faith. When looked at as an organized means of studying the scriptures, there is then an unction pervading it that is not found in any other work of its kind.

Three things stand out in Hoeksema's exposition of the Heidelberg Catechism

It is thoroughly Reformed. This means that Hoeksema always views the Catechism as subservient to scripture. This

also means that he frequently cites scripture and often exegetes various passages to demonstrate and prove the truths set forth in the Catechism.

Hoeksema's exposition is eminently doctrinal. The author unequivocally expounds the teachings of scripture as they are summarized in the Catechism. Those who are acquainted with Hoeksema's writings will be familiar with his *Reformed Dogmatics*, which by definition is doctrinal. His exposition of the Catechism in its depth and development of various aspects of the truth is even more so, and must rank with the very best of his works.

His exposition is practical. His terminology is intentionally personal, practical, and applicatory, in keeping with the perspective, language, and nature of the Catechism. Throughout he uses *we*, *us*, and *our*, by which he refers collectively to all of God's people.

In keeping with Rev. Hoeksema's intent, may God use these books for the increase of the understanding and the strengthening of the faith of all who read them.

MARK H. HOEKSEMA

## PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

If in God's inscrutable purpose there are left to me a sufficient number of days to labor, I intend to complete my commentary on the Catechism that I begin in this volume. I believe that there is room for an explanation of the Heidelberg Catechism in the English language. This part of the Reformed heritage still occupies a large place in the hearts and minds of those who love the Reformed truth, and to them this exposition should be welcome. For those who have "lost their first love," even for this best known part of the three forms of unity, it may under God's indispensable blessing serve the purpose of reviving their interest in it and in Reformed truth in general.

Even as proper preaching on the Heidelberg Catechism should never offer mere exegesis of its contents, so this exposition of the Catechism should be more than a mere commentary. While intending to be an explanation of the Catechism, this commentary also purposes to be a development of the different doctrines presented therein. How extensive the completed work will be—if with God's blessing I may be granted the opportunity to complete it—I will not attempt to predict, but as it appears now it should fill several volumes of approximately the same size as the present one.

For more than twenty-seven years I have faithfully preached once a Sunday (except on special occasions) on the Heidelberg Catechism. It is my experience that when this is faithfully done,

## IN THE MIDST OF DEATH

so that with every new series the preacher enters his task with new zeal and a firm resolution to make a study of the material presented by the Catechism, neither he nor his congregation ever grow weary of this form of doctrinal preaching, but rather grow in their appreciation of it and increase in their capacity to receive it.

May this also be the experience of those that will take the trouble to read this exposition.

HERMAN HOEKSEMA

1943

## FOREWORD

The Heidelberg Catechism teaches that we must know three things in order to live and die happily: how great our sins and miseries are, how we are delivered from them, and how we are to express our thankfulness to God for this deliverance.

*In the Midst of Death* is Herman Hoeksema's exposition of the first division of the Catechism, the main theme of which is the sin and misery of man. This first part of the Catechism is the briefest, comprising only four Lord's Days, but it is necessary because if we do not know our sins and miseries, we cannot know our deliverance or how to be thankful to God for his work of salvation.

Recognizing the importance of this section, the author thoroughly treats the doctrine of sin. He describes the law of God and its function. He speaks of the image of God and the covenant with Adam, as well as of the fall and corruption of man. He treats in detail the doctrine of total depravity, and he finishes in Lord's Day 4 with the truth of God's justice. In so doing he leads up to the truth of our deliverance.

MARK H. HOEKSEMA

# INTRODUCTION TO THE EXPOSITION OF THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM



## **The Heidelberg Catechism as a Symbol, Creed, and Confession**

The Heidelberg Catechism is part of the Reformed heritage. It belongs to the Reformed symbols or confessions. The other creeds that with the Catechism constitute the three forms of unity are the Netherlands or Belgic Confession and the Canons of Dordrecht.

Our age is not characterized by a clear knowledge and love of distinctive doctrine. Creeds do not meet with much favor in the church of today. Some churches still have creeds, but the members are not acquainted with their contents. Others have so abbreviated their confessions that they contain no distinctive doctrine at all. Many have adopted the deceiving slogan “No creed but Christ.” The Protestant Reformed Churches still value the Reformed heritage as contained in the forms of unity. Attempts are made to acquaint the members of these churches with the contents of the creeds. The young people are instructed in the doctrines of the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, and the Canons. And it is still the established custom in those churches to preach once a Sunday from the Heidelberg Catechism in such a way that no Lord’s Day is omitted.

The Heidelberg Catechism is a symbol. A symbol is a declaration by a church or group of churches of what they believe to be the truth of the word of God or the true doctrine concerning salvation. By *symbol* is expressed that the church or group of churches that framed a particular statement of doctrine consider it as their ensign. Just as a nation has its flag as a symbol of its nationality in distinction from other nations, so a church has her authoritative declaration of doctrine as a symbol or ensign that represents the catholic faith of that church over against the world, or the particular faith of a certain church in distinction from that of other churches.

The Heidelberg Catechism is also a creed. The word *creed* is derived from the Latin word *credere*, which means “to believe.” By this term a church or a group of churches expresses that its statement of the truth is an object of faith. A creed is not a mere compendium of doctrine or a system of dogmatics, but it is the setting forth of those truths that a church or denomination of churches embraces as the object of its belief. It is living truth.

The Heidelberg Catechism is also a confession. The term *confession* sets forth that a group of believers or churches openly professes its faith in unison with one another and with the Lord Jesus Christ.

There are many kinds and forms of creeds. Some briefly and comprehensively set forth only the essentials of the catholic Christian faith, such as the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed. Others are more elaborate and specific and offer a more or less detailed exposition of the truth as professed by a certain church, such as the Westminster Confession, the Belgic Confession, and the Heidelberg Catechism. Still other confessions are limited to the exposition and defense of particular points of

## INTRODUCTION

doctrine. To these belong the Canons of Dordt, which set forth the faith of the Reformed churches concerning the five points of Calvinism.

True creeds or symbols are not the result of abstract theological contemplation. They are rather to be conceived as the spiritual children of the faith of the church. Believers individually and the church of Christ collectively are set in the world to be witnesses of the truth of God. The church may not be silent, especially not as she stands in antithetical relation to the world of darkness. Her calling is to bear testimony in opposition to the lie. She partly meets this obligation through her confessions. But the church also lives by faith in Christ, and faith has in it the urge to speak. The believing church loves the truth as it is in Christ Jesus and as it is contained in the holy scriptures. She loves to contemplate that truth, strives more and more fully to understand it and to appropriate it by faith, and has the desire to witness of that truth before all the world.

Thus creeds are born from the faith of the church in contact with the holy scriptures. Phillip Schaff wrote, “Faith, like all strong conviction, has a desire to utter itself before others—‘Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh’; ‘I believe, therefore I confess’ (*Credo, ergo confiteor*).”<sup>1</sup> Although theology certainly may and does aid the church in formulating her creeds, they are never the product of abstract theological thinking but are the spontaneous expression of the faith of the church. They are born, not made. A live church will certainly have her creed, just as a living believer must bear testimony of the truth.

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1 Philip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom with a History and Critical Notes*, 6th ed., 3 vols. (New York: Harper and Row, 1931; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 1:4.

## **The Value of Creeds**

Confessions are valuable, first, because they are a means whereby the whole church expresses her faith over against the whole world, or by which a group of churches declares what it believes to be the truth of the word of God in distinction from other churches. It is the calling of the church in the world to let her light shine and to bear witness of the truth, to maintain that truth in opposition to every form of the lie. She does this through her confessions.

Second, symbols or creeds serve as a bond of union and a basis upon which a certain group of churches unites. Just as a flag is not merely an ensign that represents the distinctive nationality of a certain people in the midst of other nations, but also serves as a symbol around which a particular nation rallies, so a particular group of churches rallies around a certain confession as the symbol of its unity.

Third, creeds are means to preserve the truth as it is delivered to a church or group of churches from the past in the line of generations. It is true that the whole truth is contained in the holy scriptures. But the scriptures are the revelation of God in Christ as it was given in the process of a history of many centuries and culminated in Christ. The scriptures offer no ready-made system of doctrine. It is the need as well as the calling of the church to elicit from the scriptures the truth in doctrinal form. This is difficult labor, which often finds an incentive in the opposition of false teachers. However, this work need not and may not be started anew by the church of every age. God establishes his covenant and church in the line of continued generations, in order that one generation can enter into the fruit of the labor of another. Thus the truth is preserved

from age to age under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Creeds are a means to transmit the truth and to preserve it from one generation to the next.

Finally, confessions are excellent means of instructing the youth of the church. If a creed is to remain the expression of the faith of a church or group of churches, the individual members of such a church or churches must be acquainted with its content. The church must instruct its members, particularly its children and youth, in her doctrine. For this purpose her creeds can be excellent aids, if not textbooks. For many reasons therefore it is expedient that the church preserve and maintain her symbols.

### **The Authority of Creeds**

Confessions have only derivative authority, that is, their authority cannot replace or be put on a par with that of the holy scriptures. The word of God is and must remain the sole authority in the life of the individual believer and of the church of Jesus Christ. This does not mean that the confessions have no authority whatsoever. They are a reflection of the truth of the word of God in the believing consciousness of the church and are authoritatively expressed by the church, unto which the Lord Jesus Christ has given the power of the keys and the promise of the guidance of the Holy Spirit into all the truth. Those who submit themselves to the government of the church that is based upon a certain creed are certainly under the authority of that creed and are bound by it.

However, a creed cannot be the final court of appeal. Confessions and traditions must always be based on the scriptures.

With the scriptures they must constantly be compared, and in the scriptures' light their truth must be judged. The content of scripture cannot be subjected to the criticism of the believer or of the church, but the doctrinal declarations of the confessions must constantly be subjected to such criticism. Scripture cannot be altered or developed; confessions may and should. The Bible is infallible; the creed of the church is not. Hence the confessions must constantly be gauged by the scriptures. A church that fails to do that lapses into confessionalism and dead intellectualism.

This does not mean that the individual believer has the right or the power to alter the confession of the church of which he is a member, nor does he have the right to propagate views that conflict with the creed of his church. One who takes his confessions seriously will not even easily conclude that the doctrine set forth in the symbols of his church is erroneous. He will remember that the symbols are the product of long and earnest labor and struggle on the part of the church, and that she was guided by the Holy Spirit. But if after serious consideration and prayerful study, a believer cannot escape the conviction that with respect to a certain doctrine the creed of his church is in conflict with the Bible, he will reveal his objections to the church and try to persuade her to rectify the error. He will do this in the proper way, which in the Reformed churches is the way of consistory, classis, and synod. If he fails to convince the church, and if the doctrinal point of difference is sufficiently serious and fundamental, the way is always open to him to join himself to a purer manifestation of the body of Christ on earth. However this may be, the confession cannot have authority other than what it derives from scripture, and appeal from the creed to the Bible must always remain possible.

## Objections against Creeds

If this is borne in mind, one will find little difficulty in answering the various objections that have been and still are often raised against creeds. Some of the main objections are that the church needs no creed because the Bible is sufficient for the faith and instruction of the believers; creeds impede the development of the truth and stand in the way of unprejudiced exegesis of Holy Writ; confessions force and bind the conscience of the believer, subjecting him to doctrines of men rather than to the word of God only; creeds are the cause of much false religious zeal, engender strife and contentions, breathe the spirit of sectarianism, and cause hopeless division in the church of Christ; creeds result in doctrinal indifferentism and skepticism, which explains why the age of confessionalism in the church of the seventeenth century was followed by the age of rationalism and apostasy in the eighteenth.

Improper emphasis on the importance of symbols may be the occasion of the abuses mentioned. But all these objections fall away as long as the church remembers that the confessions can never take the place of or be placed on a par with Holy Writ, and that their contents must always be gauged by the teaching of the Bible. The truth of the sufficiency of holy scripture cannot be used as an argument to defend denying or ignoring the labor of the church in the past as it is expressed in the confessions. If symbols are kept in their proper place, that is, in subjection to scripture, they will surely not impede the development of the truth or obstruct free exegesis, for then the principle will be maintained that in no case may the doctrine of the church dominate the interpretation of the Bible. As long as the church maintains the truth that the authority of creeds

is only derivative, individual believers will always find the way open to appeal to scripture if they have objections against the confessions, and their consciences are not bound. Nor can it be said that the symbols of the church are the cause of division and contention; on the contrary, heresy and false doctrine must be blamed for these evils. The movement to establish church union by obliterating distinctive creeds can only doctrinally impoverish the church and induce doctrinal indifferentism, thus making the church a prey to the false philosophy of the world.

### **The Classes of Creeds**

The many creeds that have been framed and adopted by different churches in the course of their histories can be divided into four classes. The first class contains the ecumenical symbols of the early church, chiefly relating to the doctrines of the holy Trinity and of the natures and person of Christ. The second division embraces the symbols of the Greek church, which differs from the Western church on the well-known *filioque* controversy—the double procession of the Holy Spirit—and on the doctrine of the papacy. In the third class belong the symbols of the Roman church from the Council of Trent, which was convoked to counteract the movement of the Reformation and closed in 1563, to the Council of the Vatican, which established the doctrine of the infallibility of the pope in 1870. The fourth class comprises all the different creeds of the evangelical Protestant churches, dating mostly from the period of the Reformation. These can be divided into the Lutheran and Calvinistic creeds, which differ chiefly with respect to the

doctrines of God's decrees and the nature and efficacy of the sacraments.

To the last category belong the three forms of unity of the Reformed churches: the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, and the Canons of Dordt. A comparison of these three Reformed creeds will show that each is distinct from the others. The Belgic Confession in thirty-seven articles sets forth the chief doctrines of the Reformed churches and follows the objective-dogmatical order. The Heidelberg Catechism is much more practical and follows the subjective-experiential order of the doctrines of sin, redemption, and gratitude. The Canons of Dordt, which were occasioned by the Arminian controversy of the last part of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth century, defend the doctrine of divine predestination and the related doctrines of particular atonement, total depravity, irresistible grace, and perseverance of the saints.<sup>2</sup>

### **The History of the Heidelberg Catechism**

The name of the Heidelberg Catechism is derived from its question-and-answer format, originally designed for the instruction of the youth, and from the city where it was composed—Heidelberg in the Palatinate. About 1546 the Lutheran Reformation had gained a foothold in the Palatinate, and in 1556 Frederick III succeeded Otto Heinrich as elector of the Palatinate and ruled until 1576. Frederick III had become thoroughly Reformed in his convictions and desired to introduce the Calvinistic faith into his dominions, where previously the

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 1:9–11.

Augsburg Confession had been the sole norm of faith. Under his reign a complete reformation was accomplished.

Frederick III commissioned Zacharias Ursinus, who occupied a theological chair at Heidelberg, and Caspar Olevianus, who had been the incumbent of that chair but was then minister of the church of Heidelberg, to compose a book of instruction that developed the Reformed line of doctrine. Both men had enjoyed the personal acquaintance of Calvin and the reformers of Switzerland and were well-fitted for the task. Schaff wrote, "The peculiar gifts of both, the didactic clearness and precision of the one, and the pathetic warmth and unction of the other, were blended in beautiful harmony, and produced a joint work which is far superior to all the separate productions of either."<sup>3</sup>

The Catechism was completed and accepted by the Synod of Heidelberg in 1563. Frederick III had added a short preface in which he informed the clergy and schoolteachers of his domain that the book was composed at his injunction for the purpose of instructing the youth in churches and schools. From the outset therefore the Catechism served the double purpose of a catechetical textbook and a symbol of the church. It soon found its way into the Netherlands, where it was highly esteemed, adopted by several particular synods, and finally ratified and officially included in the forms of unity of the Reformed churches by the Synod of Dordt in 1618–19.

### **An Overview of the Heidelberg Catechism**

The Heidelberg Catechism is divided into three parts, the first treats the doctrine of sin and misery, the second the doctrine

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 1:535.

## INTRODUCTION

of redemption and deliverance from sin, following the general line of the Apostles' Creed, and the third part, under the general heading of gratitude, treats the subjects of the law and prayer. This division reveals the practical, spiritual character and viewpoint of the Catechism: it considers the content of Christian doctrine from the experience of the believing Christian. For this reason this textbook of instruction in the truth is direct and personal throughout. It addresses the conscious believer.

The Catechism is further divided into fifty-two Lord's Days, a division that was not found in the original editions but was soon introduced with a view to its being used as a basis for instruction on the Sabbath. In the first edition there appeared only one hundred twenty-eight questions and answers. The eightieth question, which refers to the popish mass as an accursed idolatry, was inserted in the second and third editions "by the express command of the Elector, perhaps by his own hand, as a Protestant counter-blast to the Romish anathemas of the Council of Trent, which closed its sessions Dec. 4, 1563."<sup>4</sup> The Catechism now contains one hundred twenty-nine questions and answers, in which is set forth in brief the whole content of the Christian faith from a Reformed viewpoint.

Introducing its instruction with a question concerning the only comfort in life and death and by stating that knowledge of sin and misery, of deliverance, and of gratitude is the indispensable element of this all-embracing comfort, the Catechism speaks of the law as the source of the knowledge of sin and misery, of the greatness of this sin and misery, of man's

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:536.

original state, willful disobedience, and total depravity, of the wrath of God and the punishment of sin, and of the impossibility of man's ever saving himself or of being saved by another creature.

The second part follows the exposition of the Apostles' Creed and treats the character of saving faith; the Trinity; creation and providence; the names, natures, offices, and states of the Mediator; his death and descent into hell; his resurrection, ascension, and exaltation at the right hand of God; and his return to judge the living and the dead. It then treats the Holy Spirit and his work, the holy catholic church and the communion of saints, the final resurrection, and eternal life. Lord's Day 23 considers the fruit of believing all this and speaks of justification by faith only. The Catechism then discusses the means of grace—the preaching of the word and the administration of the sacraments—and it closes the second part with a treatment of the keys of the kingdom of heaven.

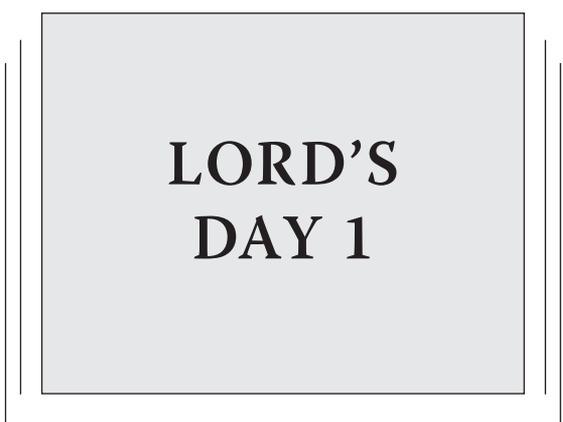
The third part is introduced by a few questions concerning the true conversion of man, which is followed by a discussion of the law of God as a guide for the Christian's walk and by a treatment of each commandment separately. This discussion is concluded with the well-known question, can those who are converted keep all these things perfectly? and the beautiful reply, even the very holiest men in this life have only a small beginning of the new obedience, yet they have sincere desires to live according to all the commandments of God. The Catechism closes with a discussion of the subject of prayer in general and of the content of the Lord's prayer in particular.

The Heidelberg Catechism is a veritable treasure of the triple knowledge of which it speaks in the second question and

## INTRODUCTION

answer, and which is indispensable for the possession of true comfort in life and death. It is the most widely known and generally used of all Reformed symbols. It is rich in content, beautifully simple in form, and highly spiritual in tone and character. If it were composed in our time, some of its chapters, notably those on the sacraments, would be considerably abridged, while others would be enlarged. Yet from the viewpoint both of its being a symbol of the Reformed churches and of its being intended as a catechism, the Heidelberg Catechism is one of the most beautiful and masterful compositions of all time. Our Reformed fathers gave evidence of their sound practical judgment when they ordained that one of the sermons on each Sabbath should be based on one of the Lord's Days of this precious little book.





**LORD'S  
DAY 1**

Q. *1. What is thy 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, hath 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, and therefore, by his Holy Spirit, he also assures me of eternal life, and makes me sincerely willing and ready, henceforth, to live unto him.

Q. *2. How many things are necessary for thee to know, that thou, enjoying this comfort, mayest live and die happily?*

A. Three: the first, how great my sins and miseries are; the second, how I may be delivered from all my sins and miseries; the third, how I shall express my gratitude to God for such deliverance.

## *Chapter One*



# LORD'S DAY 1

## **The Viewpoint of the Heidelberg Catechism**

The text of the first Lord's Day quoted on the previous page is the most commonly used text. The English version offered by Schaff, which according to him is much better than the quoted version, was prepared by a committee "in the name of and by direction of a synod of the German Reformed Church held in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, in 1859."<sup>1</sup> Its text of Lord's Day 1 differs in some minor details from the quoted one. Instead of "delivered me from all the power of the devil," it has "redeemed me from all the power of the devil." Although "redeemed" is a more literal translation than "delivered," "delivered" expresses the thought more correctly than "redeemed" does. Instead of "all things must be subservient to my salvation," it has "all things must work together for my salvation." The former adheres more closely to the German text. Like the German text, Schaff's ver-

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:530; 3:307.

sion begins a new sentence with “wherefore, by his Holy Spirit, he also assures me of eternal life,” and more correctly than the quoted text it renders “sincerely willing” by “heartily willing.”<sup>2</sup>

More important is the difference in the rendering of question 2. The quoted text has “that thou, enjoying this comfort, mayest live and die happily?” Schaff’s version is certainly the correct rendering of the German, and it is more objective as to its meaning and stronger than “enjoying this comfort.” “In this comfort” presents the comfort not merely as a matter of feeling and joy, but as the basis of our living and dying happily, as the sphere and cause of it. One’s whole life—his thinking and willing and desiring, his speech and actions—is characterized and spiritually determined by this all-comprehensive comfort. This is expressed much more correctly and forcefully by “in this comfort” than by “enjoying this comfort.” Finally, Schaff’s text renders the first part of the second answer: “First, the greatness of my sin and misery,” where the quoted text is a more correct translation of the German.<sup>3</sup>

It will be evident at once that Lord’s Day 1 is designed to be introductory to the whole Catechism. The teacher or preacher who would enter into a detailed interpretation of the various elements of the truth that appear in this first chapter of the Catechism would make a serious mistake. He would find that there would be very little left for him to explain in the rest of the Catechism. So does the preacher err when he expounds Lord’s Day 1 by a general explanation of all the different truths mentioned in it. He would merely scan the surface of many

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2 Heidelberg Catechism A 1, in *ibid.*, 3:308.

3 Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 2, in *ibid.*

## LORD'S DAY 1

points of doctrine, would lack the time sufficiently to explain any one of them, surely would fail to present the truth as living reality, and would bring his congregation from the start into a state of mind in which it would be difficult for him to make them believe that preaching on the Heidelberg Catechism is either important or interesting. Lord's Day 1 speaks of an only comfort of life and of death; of body and soul; of not being our own but belonging to our faithful savior Jesus Christ; of satisfaction through the precious blood of Christ; of deliverance from all the power of the devil; of our preservation by our heavenly Father, so that not a hair can fall from our heads contrary to his will and so that all things must serve the purpose of our salvation; of the personal assurance of being heirs of eternal life; of sanctification, so that we are heartily willing and prepared to live unto God; of the Holy Spirit; of the knowledge of sin and misery; of salvation; and of the gratitude we owe to God for such deliverance. How could a preacher mold all these different elements into the content of his sermon without sacrificing the unity of his discourse and becoming guilty of offering to his audience mere generalities, unless he would commit the foolishness of some of preaching more than two score times on the first question of the Catechism?

Neither a detailed interpretation of the first Lord's Day nor a general survey of the various doctrines mentioned therein is required or expedient when one expounds this chapter of the Heidelberg Catechism to his congregation. Rather he must understand that this Lord's Day is introductory and that it presents the viewpoint from which the entire system of doctrine is considered, the viewpoint from which the Catechism would have its pupils look at the truth of the word of God.

This viewpoint is immediately and concisely expressed in the first question: “What is thy only comfort in life and death?” There can be no doubt that the Heidelberg Catechism considers and explains the truth from the viewpoint of the consciousness and subjective experience of the believing Christian in this world. In this respect it differs radically from both of the Westminster Catechisms. The Westminster Larger Catechism begins as follows:

*Q. What is the chief and highest end of man?*

A. Man’s chief and highest end is, to glorify God, and fully to enjoy him forever.

*Q. How doth it appear that there is a God?*

A. The very light of nature, the works of God, declare plainly that there is a God: but his Word and Spirit only do sufficiently and effectually reveal him unto men for their salvation.

*Q. What is the Word of God?*

A. The holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament are the Word of God, the only Rule of Faith and obedience.<sup>4</sup>

Then the Westminster Catechism continues to treat the doctrine of God, his virtues, the Trinity, the decrees, creation, man, the fall, and the rest.

The Westminster starts out from the objective end and calling of man: to glorify God and to enjoy him forever. The Heidelberg Catechism starts with the subjective appropriation and experience of this truth by the individual Christian: my comfort

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<sup>4</sup> Westminster Larger Catechism Q&A 1–3, in *ibid.*, 3:675.

is that I belong to my faithful savior Jesus Christ. The viewpoint of the Westminster Catechism is doctrinally objective; that of the Heidelberg Catechism is experientially subjective. The viewpoint of the Westminster is general and impersonal: it addresses no one, but speaks of “man”; that of the Catechism is specific and personal: it speaks to the man of God.

Insisting that the Catechism proceeds from the viewpoint of the subjective experience of the individual believer does not imply that the Catechism is anthropocentric: it makes man the center and end of all things—his redemption, deliverance, happiness, and eternal life are what count. Some allege this and point out that this is the characteristic difference between the Catechism and some other symbols, such as the Belgic Confession and the Westminster Catechisms, which they claim are theocentric: they place God in the center of things and present him as the end and purpose of all existence.

This judgment is incorrect. I do not characterize the Heidelberg Catechism in this way when I claim that its viewpoint is subjectively experiential. It is not impossible to present a theocentric truth from the viewpoint of its being appropriated by faith and experienced in the consciousness of the Christian. This is what the Heidelberg Catechism attempts to do. It is not anthropocentric to appeal to the law of God as the criterion and source of the knowledge of man's misery or to begin a discussion of the content of the Christian's faith with an exposition of the first article of the Apostles' Creed or to teach that man was created rightly to know God his creator, heartily to love him, and to live with him in eternal happiness to glorify and praise him. It is not anthropocentric to describe the quickening of the new man as a “sincere joy of heart in God, through Christ, and

with love and delight to live according to the will of God in all good works” or to limit good works to those that “proceed from a true faith, are performed according to the law of God, and to his glory” (A 90–91). It certainly is not anthropocentric, but positively theocentric to present true prayer as the highest expression of thankfulness or to close the discussion of the subject of prayer with the words “all this we pray for, that thereby not we, but thy holy name may be glorified for ever” (A 128). But I do claim that the Heidelberg Catechism considers the truth, which is always theocentric, from the viewpoint of its being appropriated and experienced by the believing Christian, and more particularly from the viewpoint that it is his sole comfort in life and death.

This already removes in part the danger of another possible misunderstanding. Saying that the Heidelberg Catechism is subjective and experiential in viewpoint does not imply that it makes man the criterion and source of the truth, which is done in two ways. Man’s intellect or reason is presented as the final court of appeal to determine what truth is. To do so is rationalism. It is not rationalism to present the truth as reasonable, as adapted to the understanding of man. The truth is not illogical, unreasonable, or contrary to the mind of the Christian. But it is rationalism to elevate reason to the position of supreme judge, to let man’s mind decide what truth is. The Christian lives by revelation not by the conclusions of reason.

Man can also be presented as the measure and source of the truth by mysticism, which replaces the objective revelation and word of God by feeling, certain states of consciousness, inner light, and the direct whisperings of the Spirit of God to one’s spirit. There is no essential difference between rational-

ism and mysticism. Both deny the objective word or revelation of God as the sole rule for faith and life. Both make man the measure and source of the truth.

This, however, is not the method of the Heidelberg Catechism. It does not derive the knowledge of the truth from the mind or the feeling of the individual believer or from the consciousness of the church, but it always appeals to the word of God. The objective law of God is the source of the knowledge of our misery. Question 19, whence knowest thou that Jesus Christ is the mediator? is answered by pointing to "the holy gospel, which God himself first revealed in Paradise; and afterwards published by the patriarchs and prophets, and represented by the sacrifices and other ceremonies of the law; and lastly, has fulfilled it by his only begotten Son." The decalogue is recommended as the guide for the Christian's life, and the prayer that the Lord taught us is taken as the perfect model for all our prayers. The Catechism throughout recognizes the word of God as the sole source and criterion of the truth. The Catechism is neither rationalistic nor mystical.

Yet the viewpoint is that of the subjective experience, or that of the spiritual knowledge of the objective truth of the word of God as possessed by the believing Christian in the world. There is an evident difference between the questions, what is the chief end of man and what is thy only comfort in life and death? There is an obvious difference between the three-fold division of the Catechism—sin and misery, redemption, and gratitude—and the well-known six loci of dogmatics. The Catechism treats the truth not as a science, but as the spiritual knowledge that is eternal life (John 17:3). It discusses the system of doctrine from the viewpoint of the faith of him to whose

heart the objective word of God has been applied by the Spirit of Christ, who dwells in the church and leads into all the truth. It is not a theology; it is knowledge of God.

The one who speaks in the Catechism is regenerated and called. The word has been applied to his heart. He has ears to hear and eyes to see. He stands in the midst of the world, full of misery and darkness; outside of Christ he lies in the midst of death. The clear understanding of that word—as it reveals to him God in Christ and redemption and deliverance from the power of sin and death, as he by faith lays hold upon that word—is his sole and all-sufficient comfort in life and death. In that thoroughly sound sense the Catechism is experiential and subjective in its approach to the truth.

Closely connected with this viewpoint of the Catechism is that it is very personal, addressing throughout the member of the church as the man of God who must be thoroughly furnished unto all good works. It speaks always in the singular: “What is *thy* only comfort?” “How many things are necessary for *thee* to know, that *thou* in this comfort mayest live and die happily?” “Whence knowest *thou* thy misery?” “What believest *thou*?” The one addressed is the baptized child of the church, considered as a living member.

In this respect the Heidelberg Catechism proceeds from the same viewpoint as the Reformed form for baptism. The child of the covenant is sanctified in Christ and is baptized as a member of his church. God has forgiven us and our children all our sins, received us through his Holy Spirit as members of his only begotten Son, adopted us to be his children, and sealed and confirmed the same unto us by holy baptism. This is the viewpoint of the baptism form. It is no different with the Hei-

delberg Catechism. The children of the covenant who must be instructed are living children of God.

This does not mean that the Catechism teaches pre-supposed regeneration. It does not speak on the basis of a supposition: it speaks with certainty. Neither does this mean that the Catechism lives under the illusion that all the members of the church on earth are spiritual members of Christ's body. When the Catechism speaks of the keys of the kingdom of heaven, it reveals clearly that it knows there is a carnal seed of the covenant. But this carnal seed is not addressed; it is left out of view. It is the spiritual seed who must be instructed in the word of God. This spiritual seed, the man of God, must be made perfect, thoroughly furnished unto every good work. It is the only seed who can be instructed and who can be made perfect in the truth. This spiritual seed the Catechism addresses throughout. It has nothing for the others.

In this respect the Catechism stands far above the level of the church of our day, even above the level of those who call themselves Reformed. They administer the sacrament of baptism to the children of the covenant; they ask of the parents the confession that their children, though conceived and born in sin, are sanctified in Christ and members of the church; they lead their people in thanksgiving that God has forgiven us and our children all our sins and adopted us to be his children. But when it comes to actual application of this sound and strong doctrine, they deny it all, and instead of instructing and confirming the true seed of the covenant in the truth of the word of God, they come with offers of grace, altar calls, and what not!

If many spoke their minds, they would have to confess that they consider it a dangerous practice to confront the children

of the church with the pertinent question of the Catechism, what is your only comfort in life and death? They would rather substitute another: do you have the only comfort in life and death? Still more dangerous they would consider the business of placing upon the lips of the congregation, believers and their children, the answer of the Catechism: “that I with body and soul...am not my own, but belong unto my faithful Savior Jesus Christ.” Yet in the age of the Reformation this was a common practice. The Heidelberg Catechism in this respect is no exception. It agrees with other catechisms.

Luther’s Small Catechism, written in 1529, has a different approach from that of the Heidelberg Catechism: it commences with a discussion of the ten commandments. But when it discusses the articles of our faith, it becomes very personal and direct. Following the article concerning Jesus Christ our Lord in the Apostles’ Creed comes this question and answer:

*What does this mean?*

I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary, is my Lord; who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned man, secured and delivered me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver, but with his holy, precious blood, and with his innocent sufferings and death; in order that I might be his own, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence and blessedness, even as he is risen from the dead, and lives and reigns forever. This is most certainly true.<sup>5</sup>

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5 Luther’s Small Catechism 2, in *ibid.*, 3:79.

The Anglican Catechism, first written in 1549 and last revised in 1662, has a peculiar approach, but it proceeds from the same principle: the one instructed is the living child of the covenant. Here is a little of it:

*What is your name?*

N. or M.

*Who gave you this name?*

My Godfathers and Godmothers in my Baptism; wherein I was made a member of Christ, the child of God, and an inheritor of the kingdom of heaven.

*What did your Godfathers and Godmothers then for you?*

They did promise and vow three things in my name. First, that I should renounce the devil and all his works, the pomps and vanity of the wicked world, and all the sinful lusts of the flesh. Secondly, that I should believe all the Articles of the Christian Faith. And, thirdly, that I should keep God's holy will and commandments, and walk in the same all the days of my life.

*Dost thou not think that thou art bound to believe and to do as they have promised for thee?*

Yes, verily; and by God's help so I will. And I heartily thank our heavenly Father that he hath called me to this state of salvation through Jesus Christ our Saviour. And I pray unto God to give me his grace, that I may continue in the same unto my life's end.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Anglican Catechism, in *ibid.*, 3:517–18.

I do not quote this to express agreement with everything that is taught there or with the practice of the Anglican church in the seventeenth century. But this catechism shows how in the period of the Reformation and shortly after, the church instructed its spiritual seed in the truth of the word of God.

This, then, is the viewpoint of the Heidelberg Catechism. Those who are called to preach from this book of instruction will do well to bear in mind the Catechism's viewpoint. Approaching the truth from the viewpoint of the conscious experience of the believing Christian and addressing the living member of the church, the Catechism aims to bring the man of God to a conscious knowledge of the living truth, of the only comfort in life and death.

### **The Idea of Only Comfort**

The first question of the Heidelberg Catechism speaks of an "only comfort in life and death." There are three elements in this question that at once draw our attention and require explanation. The first is that when the Catechism speaks of comfort, the question arises, what is the implication of this concept? What is true comfort? The second element is expressed by "only." By this qualification the Christian comfort is characterized as an exclusive and sufficient comfort. One who has this comfort needs no other. The third element is expressed in the words "in life and death," which describe comfort as all-embracing. It covers all. It meets all possible requirements and presupposes that life requires comfort as well as death.

What is the idea of comfort, particularly of Christian comfort?  
Zacharias Ursinus, one of the authors of the Heidelberg

Catechism, gave an explanation of the Catechism in the form of lectures to his students.<sup>7</sup> He gave the following definition of comfort:

Comfort is a certain determination of the mind, whereby we posit some good thing over against a certain evil which we experience, by the contemplation of which we alleviate the grief and patiently bear the evil.<sup>8</sup>

Abraham Kuyper agreed with the chief idea of this definition. According to him comfort is “a consideration in our mind or intellect.”<sup>9</sup> Kuyper expressed an important truth upon which we should insist, provided we do not give it all the emphasis. I refer to the statement that comfort is a determination, a conclusion,

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7 The first Dutch edition of these lectures was published in 1602 and was titled *Het schat-boeck der christelycke leere; ofte uytlegginghe over den catechismus; ende verclaringhe der besonderste hooftstukken der christelijcke religie / van doctor Zacharias Ursinus eertijts in de universiteyt van Heydelbergh int Latijn voorgelesen; ende nu nieuwelijcx ten dienste der Nederlantsche gemeynten also overgeset, dat dit werck den ghemeynen man nu mede dienstich can wesen* [The treasure-book of Christian doctrine; or interpretation of the catechism; and explanation of the most special chapters of the Christian religion of Dr. Zacharias Ursinus, formerly delivered in Latin in the University of Heidelberg; and now recently also translated by Festus Hommius in the service of the Dutch congregations, so that this work can be of service also to the common man] (Leyden: Andries Clouck, 1602). Whenever I speak of or quote from the *Schat-boek*, as the work is generally known, the reference is to Zacharias Ursinus, *Verklaring op den Heidelbergschen Catechismus* [Explanation of the Heidelberg Catechism], trans. Cornelis van Proosdij (Kampen: Zalsman, 1884–86). All translations from *Verklaring op den Heidelbergschen Catechismus* are mine.

8 Ibid, 1:21.

9 Abraham Kuyper, *E Voto Dordraceno: Toelichting op den Heidelbergschen Catechismus* [In accordance with the prayer of Dordt: Explanation of the Heidelberg Catechism], 4 vols. (Amsterdam: Hovëker and Wormser, 1904–5), 1:3. All translations from *E Voto Dordraceno* are mine.

or a consideration of the mind. If we would say nothing more than this, the definition would be incorrect. It would be untrue because of its one-sidedness. If in the subsequent exposition of the truth we would follow the lead of this definition, the result would be intellectualism or dead orthodoxy. Man is more than mere intellect, mind, or reason. He is also a volitional being. He has a will, emotions, desires, imagination, and feelings. He is a being with heart and mind and soul and strength.

Comfort concerns the whole man. It is not merely a consideration of the mind, a decision of the intellect, a conclusion of reason. Faith is more than knowledge; it is also confidence. Religion is more than doctrine; it is life and joy. Comfort is more than a mere decision of the mind; it is also a determination of the will that affects all the desires and emotions. And Christian comfort is a matter of the heart, whence are the issues of life.

Yet it should be maintained that comfort is also a consideration and conclusion of the mind; in the case of Christian comfort, it is a determination of the believing mind. This must be emphasized over against all forms of emotionalism and false mysticism, in opposition to all who deny or belittle the value and necessity of Christian knowledge and doctrine and therefore also of Christian instruction. Especially since the last part of the eighteenth century, some would separate the emotional life of man from his intellect and would make of emotion a separate power or faculty of the soul and give it a more or less independent place. It is amazing how much is relegated to the domain of the emotions or feeling. It is through feeling that we distinguish ourselves from the outside world and that we become individuals, personal beings. Religion and morality become matters of feeling.

One can readily understand that this is the deathblow to Christian doctrine. Feelings certainly are not decisions of the mind; the intellect has nothing directly to do with feelings. A dogmatics cannot be construed from feelings or on the basis of emotions. All that pertains to religion and morality would then be subjective and vague. The word of God cannot serve as the source or criterion of a religion of the feelings. It would make no sense to ask, what is your only comfort in life and death? For an intelligent account of feelings is impossible. In opposition to this it is important to maintain the truth that comfort is a consideration of the intellect and that without this intellectual consideration and conclusion Christian comfort is impossible. Faith is more than knowledge, but it is also knowledge; and without the knowledge of faith the confidence of faith is impossible. You cannot make a Christian by instruction, but the Christian can be indoctrinated, and by growing in the knowledge of Jesus Christ may increase in the conscious possession of the true comfort in life and death.

In the case of Christian comfort, the consideration of the intellect, the conclusion of the mind, is not a mere rational process or the result of a syllogism. The only comfort in life and death is concerned with a good that eye has not seen and ear has not heard and that has never arisen in the heart of man. Only by the mind of faith can this good be posited over against the evil of life and death. Faith lays hold upon what the Spirit of God reveals to us not by inner light, as the mystics say, but by the word of God as we possess it in the scriptures.

The believing mind lays hold upon the promise of God, is certain of that promise, contemplates that promise, so that the believing heart embraces the thing promised and esteems it so

great and gracious that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with it. Thus when Abraham was called to sacrifice the child of the promise, by faith he posited the good that God was able to raise his son from the dead. Moses esteemed the reproach of the people of God, the reproach of Christ, greater riches than all the treasures of Egypt, for he had respect unto the recompense of the reward. Both actually did some accounting, some figuring. In the case of Abraham this is literally expressed in Hebrews 11:19: "Accounting that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead; from whence also he received him in a figure." Both Abraham and Moses performed acts of the mind, both reached conclusions concerning good that they placed over against evil. But faith laid hold on the promise of God, yea, on him who calls the things that were not as if they were and who raises the dead (Rom. 4:17). Thus a consideration of the mind, which is implied in Christian comfort, is based on the word of God and is an activity of faith in the promise.

True comfort is the positing of a good over against an evil. But more must be said. Is comfort perfect when we are aware of both an existing evil and, over against it, an existing good? Evidently not, for evil still exists. It is true that the contemplation of the good may alleviate the suffering and relatively lighten the burden, but it cannot reconcile us to the evil we experience. As long as our experience is dualistic, and we are conscious of a good and of an evil in juxtaposition, our comfort cannot be perfect. We can conceive of a far happier state: one in which only good exists. Nor is comfort perfect when the good of which we are aware and that we posit over against the evil we suffer is greater, even much greater, than the existing evil, for

the evil remains. There remains the possibility of conceiving of a happier lot for ourselves, one in which the evil has no place.

Perhaps we are inclined to say that comfort is complete and perfect when, over against the prevailing evil we know of a good that is not only far greater than the evil, but also can ultimately remove the evil. We know of a good that overcomes the evil. We are contemplating a good that is victorious over the evil. Although in that case our comfort is far greater because of the prospect of final deliverance from the evil, the dualism still remains.

The question must arise, why should there be an evil at all? We can conceive of a more blessed situation: one in which we enjoy the good from the beginning, the joy of which was never for a moment marred by the suffering of the evil. We must go a step farther to arrive at the conception of full and perfect comfort. It is the consciousness and contemplation of a good so great and precious that the evil we suffer for a time cannot be compared with it and is strictly subservient and necessary unto the attainment of the good.

Only when we contemplate the evil as a means to the end of the great good do we have full and perfect comfort. Only in that case do we have the final answer to the question, why should the evil exist at all, even for a time? Only in that light can we see that the evil is only relatively an evil, while absolutely it is a good. I may have to walk a steep and rugged road; to travel it means toil and suffering; but if it is the only way that leads me to my destination, the almost impassable road is nevertheless a good, and I become reconciled to my suffering. A surgical operation may cause much pain and suffering, and I may dread to submit myself to it; but if I have the assurance

that it is the only and sure way to recovery, I consider it a good. Perfect comfort therefore is the knowledge and contemplation of a great good over against an evil that is subservient to the good and necessary to its attainment.

Such is the comfort of the Christian, the only comfort in life and in death.

Ursinus may not have conceived of the Christian comfort in this light, as his definition would give us reason to surmise, but surely it is the underlying idea of the first question and answer of the Heidelberg Catechism. How otherwise could it have spoken of an *only* comfort and a comfort *in life and in death*?

Let us consider the deep seriousness of the realities of life and death as moving on the same plane and belonging to the same category, as they are viewed and evaluated in this amazing question of the Catechism. It draws the lines sharply. It speaks of an *only* comfort. Consider the implication of this qualification. It is not a great comfort or a chief comfort. That would make it relative. It would leave us many comforts, among which there is one that is easily the greatest. But if that were our view of life and death, we could not possibly agree with the first question of the Catechism. The comfort of which it speaks is exclusive. It brooks no competition, no comparison. It will have sole sway, or it will have nothing to do with you. It is like a physician who offers you just one particular treatment of your disease, on condition that you refrain from taking any other medicine or treatment. It takes all your other comforts away. It wants to be all or nothing.

Even so the seriousness of the situation as presented by this bold question may not be clear. To understand clearly we must also consider that this comfort presents itself as all-embracing

and fully sufficient in all cases. It is not an only or an exclusive comfort in a given case, such as in the most serious case of death. Perhaps we could more readily agree with the Catechism if it had not spoken of life and death, but simply of death in connection with the only comfort. That would make the question quite intelligible. Even the flesh can understand the question in this slightly altered form: what is thy only comfort in death? Death! Death in distinction from life, even from our present life! Yes indeed, that is the great evil for which there is no remedy, over against which the mind cannot posit any good derived from this life that is sufficient to serve as comfort, even in the slightest degree. Life is good to us. True, there are also many evils, but these are more than counterbalanced by the good. There is much that is unpleasant, much toil and labor, much pain and suffering, much sorrow and grief, but there are also many comforts that alleviate the suffering.

Thus the mind considers. We do some accounting. We divide our experiences into two classes. We put the things of this present life on two piles. Evaluating the one class, we complain of our lot and way and conclude that there is a good deal of evil and suffering. But we turn to the pile for our comfort and say, "We have much to be thankful for." So we speak of comfort in life, meaning that there is a silver lining to every dark cloud, that there is a good deal of sweet mixed with the bitter, that there are many things that make life worth living. To speak of an *only* comfort in life sounds unintelligible, absurd, too absolute.

If it were not for the death that makes an end to this life, we could get along quite well without any other comforts than those we find in this life. Is not the unique terror of death that

it cuts off this present life? We admit that over against death we can think of nothing that can comfort us. All our other comforts we can find in life, in this world; but for a comfort in death, life offers nothing. To obtain this comfort we go to church on Sunday. When we are dying, we call the minister to pray for us (and, if it seems at all reasonable, to pray that we may recover and stay in this life), or one calls a priest to administer extreme unction.

So all is well. Comfort in life is rain and sunshine; having enough to eat and to drink, a good job, a doctor when I am sick and looking forward to recovery; having some money in the bank, a pleasant home, a lovely spouse, and dear children; peace and prosperity in the country, or their return after war rages, and depression makes life less pleasant; and if I may also have an only comfort in death, I am well off and have no reason to complain.

That would seem a reasonable philosophy—the philosophy of common grace and special grace, of many comforts in life and an only comfort in death. Any normal intelligence can grasp such a world-and-life-and-death view. And who could possibly be offended by it?

But consider the conception of life and death implied in the first question of the Catechism. Clearly it can express only one thing: that life and death are both evils when considered apart from this comfort. It speaks of life and death in one breath. It puts them in the same class. You need the same comfort in life and in death. It means that life is also death, “nothing but a continual death,” when evaluated by itself without the light

of this only comfort.<sup>10</sup> This life—as I live it in this mortal and corruptible body, as it is hemmed in on all sides by death, as it inevitably and inexorably ends in death—is an evil that offers no comfort. The life into which I am born through the will of the flesh, on whose pathway I move inevitably from my first breath in the direction of death and in the domain of death, the life whose limit is threescore years and ten or fourscore years at the utmost, is an evil unless you can bring into account the only comfort in life and in death.

Life and all it implies, life in which I eat and drink, labor and toil, marry a spouse and bring forth children; life and all its activity in labor and industry, business and commerce, science and art; life in all its relationships of natural love and friendship, of parent and child, of brother and sister, of man to man, group to group, and nation to nation; life with its sorrows and joys, with its moaning and singing, with its sickness and pains and health—life as it is in this world is in this first question of the Catechism mentioned in one breath with death. Together with death and in inseparable connection with death, it is the evil over against which the believing mind posits a good that overcomes the evil of life and of death; even more, a comfort that presses evil into the service of good and death into the service of life.

Such is the idea of this only comfort. It is a decision of the believing mind that clings to and takes into account the promise of God. It is the knowledge and personal assurance of a great good, without which life and death are evils from which there is

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10 Form for the Administration of Baptism, in *The Confessions and the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville, MI: Protestant Reformed Churches in America, 2005), 261.

no escape; of a good that cannot be found within the scope of life and death, that comes from without, that transcends it, that is both exclusive and all-embracing, and unto the attainment of which the present evils of life and of death are necessary and subservient as means to an end.

### **The Content of the Christian Comfort**

What is that great good, the knowledge and consideration of which is sufficient to be a true and sole comfort in life and in death? “That I with body and soul, both in life and death, am not my own, but belong unto my faithful Savior Jesus Christ.” One might easily be tempted to elaborate and practically to anticipate the entire content of the Catechism. He might explain in detail the meaning of “my faithful Savior” and of belonging to him, how one becomes his property, that God has given the elect to him from eternity, that Christ purchased us to be his own by his precious blood, and that we are united by faith with that faithful savior.

But this is not the purpose of Lord’s Day 1. It intends to be introductory, and as such it must be treated. Therefore the central idea must be clearly grasped. It must receive all the emphasis in one’s exposition, and all the details mentioned in this first answer must be used only insofar as they are necessary to set forth the central thought in all its significance: That I belong to Christ is an all-sufficient comfort to me in life and in death, a comfort beside which no other comfort is either necessary or conceivable. To belong to Christ means that all is well. One who is conscious of this relationship to Christ considers all things in life and in death in the light of it, and evaluating things

in that light, is sure that the evil of this present time, including death, must be subservient to the attainment of a great good that could not otherwise be realized.

Clearly and fully you realize the evil of life and death. You do not close your eyes to reality. You know that life and death are both death. There is no way out, as far as you can see. You realize you sin. You know you have a load of guilt that increases every day and makes you damnable in the sight of God and worthy of eternal desolation. You know that you are hopelessly in the power of death and corruption, that sin has dominion over you, and that you cannot liberate yourself from that slavery of sin. You know too that God is righteous and just and is angry with the wicked every day. He will never excuse you or acquit you when you appear before him in judgment. You realize that he judges you every day, every moment of your life, and that his sentence is always, "Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them" (Gal. 3:10). And you say, "My sole comfort over against this crushing evil is that I belong to Christ."

Presently you lie on your deathbed. You feel how impotent you are in your struggle against that last enemy. But you clearly understand that even death is of God. You do not merely die somehow according to some law of nature. No, death is the hand of God. God speaks in and through death, and he speaks the language of wrath: "In thy wrath we pine and die."<sup>11</sup> And in that last moment of struggle and anguish, when the chill

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11 No. 244:3, in *The Psalter with Doctrinal Standards, Liturgy, Church Order, and added Chorale Section*, reprinted and revised edition of the 1912 United Presbyterian *Psalter* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1927).

hand of death chokes you and the cold sweat of suffocation is upon your brow, the murderer from the beginning, the devil, that accuser of the brethren, reminds you of all your sins and transgressions and brings them into causal connection with the fact of your death. He impresses upon your mind that death is the hand of God and is the punishment for sin. He brings you before the tribunal of God and shows you that you will never be able to stand before him. Sorrows of death are compassing you, and pains of hell get hold of you. And you do not try to minimize the seriousness of the evil. You do not appeal to extenuating circumstances. You make no attempt to diminish the greatness of your sins. You agree with the tempter that you are damnable. But you do not despair. Facing the full reality of the evil that engulfs you, you say triumphantly, "But this is my only and all-sufficient comfort, that I belong to Christ!"

Yes, the only comfort in life and in death is that we belong to our faithful savior Jesus Christ!

It is your answer too in all circumstances of your present life, for life is nothing but a continual death. All things seem to go against you, and it seems that your chastisement awaits you every morning. There is depression in the land, and in vain you walk the streets of the city to find employment so you can provide for your family. Whatever savings you were able to lay up for such times are soon consumed. You lose your home. You are forced to live on relief or on charity. What is your only comfort? That soon the evil days will be over and prosperity will return to the land? No, that you belong to Christ.

Sickness attacks your frame, and day after day, week after week, month after month, you travel a way of suffering. What is your only comfort? That there are physicians and means

to alleviate your suffering, or that you can look forward to recovery? No, that your only consolation is that you belong to Christ.

Death enters your home and takes away a dear child, tearing it from your heart. Again, your only comfort is that you are not your own, but belong to your faithful savior Jesus Christ. War rages in the world, and the foundations of the earth are shaken. Perhaps you are called to take up arms, or your sons are sent to the battlefields. What is your comfort in the midst of all the confusion and suffering of this present time? That the war will soon cease and peace will be restored, and your sons will return from the war in safety? No, your only comfort in all this is that you belong to Christ. Your relationship to Christ is always sufficient.

Why is this true? How is this possible? What is there in this relationship to Christ that causes it to be the source of such an all-comprehensive comfort? Who is this Christ, to whom to belong means that all is well?

He is the Christ. That explains fully why it is a comfort, why it is the only possible comfort, and why it is an all-embracing comfort to belong to him. He is the Christ of God, as Colossians 1:15–20 explains:

15. [He is] the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature:
16. For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him:
17. And he is before all things, and by him all things consist.

18. And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence.
19. For it pleased the Father that in him should all fulness dwell;
20. And, having made peace through the blood of his cross, by him to reconcile all things unto himself; by him, I say, whether they be things in earth, or things in heaven.

Do you see why it is an all-comprehensive comfort to belong to him?

He is Christ, the Lord. He is the Lord of heaven and of earth. God's Lord is he, the Christ, ordained by God from before the foundation of the world. Christ is the firstborn of every creature and the first begotten of the dead. All things were created with a view to him, to his revelation, to his final glory and victory. He is the Alpha and the Omega. Nothing exists that does exist, nothing moves that does move, nothing develops that does develop, nothing happens that does happen—whether light or darkness, sin or grace, the devil or antichrist, life or death, sickness or health, prosperity or adversity, joy or sorrow, war or peace, or angels or principalities or powers—nothing in heaven, on earth, or in hell exists or acts except for him. The world is upheld and governed by him. All the lines of history converge in him. He is the center of all things, the reason for all things, the pivot on which all things turn, in order that in and through him all things might be to the praise of God who created them.

Things are not what they seem: hopeless chaos, vanity of vanities, encircled by death, from which there is no way out. In Christ, God's Christ, the Lord of life and of death, the Lord

of all, they have their reason and unity. In him absolutely all things must and do tend to the final and eternal state of glory, in which all things will be united in him, and God will be all in all. For such was the good pleasure that God purposed in himself "that in the dispensation of the fulness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth" (Eph. 1:10).

Christ, the Lord! The firstborn of every creature and the first begotten of the dead!

Do you not see that to belong to that mighty Lord—who was revealed as Christ, the Lord, in the fullness of time; who came into the world as Christ, the Lord; who spoke as Christ, the Lord; who suffered and died as Christ, the Lord; who was raised from the dead on the third day as Christ, the Lord; who ascended into the highest heavens and is seated at the right hand of the Most High as Christ, the Lord; who has absolutely all power in heaven and on earth as Christ, the Lord; and who will come again in due time to judge the living and the dead as Christ, the Lord—to belong to him is absolutely your only comfort in life and in death?

If you do not belong to him, you are in a sense your own with body and soul, in life and in death. In a sense, for you are still God's, and strictly speaking you have nothing you can call your own. To him you owe your very breath and existence. He still demands that you love him with all your heart and soul and strength, that you glorify him and be thankful. But you are your own in that you stand alone, at your own responsibility, left to help yourself. You are outside of that communion in which Christ is the Lord. Still there is life and death. Still there is the load of guilt that you can never pay. Still there is the dominion

of the devil and of corruption from which you can never liberate yourself. Still there is death encompassing you on every side. And in the midst of it all, you are your own. Your lord is the devil, your god is your belly, your way is corruption, and your end is destruction. And you have no answer to anything, no solution to the problem of existence, no way out of death, and no comfort either in life or in death.

But I am not my own! I belong to Christ, the Lord. That means that he is *my* Lord in every sense. It means that he owns me and that I am his property with body and soul, in life and in death, for time and eternity. It implies that he is responsible for me, for my body and for my soul, for my all in life and in death—responsible for me as part of that whole of which he is the appointed Lord and which he must keep, preserve, and lead into the eternal glory of his kingdom. It signifies that he is ordained to rule over me and that he actually does have dominion over me, over my body and my soul, over my mind and my will, over all that I am and have, in life and in death, in time and in eternity.

Christ, the Lord, is my Lord! It means that all things are mine: whether Paul, or Apollos, or Cephas, or in the world, or life, or death (yes, even death!), or things present, or things to come—all things are mine. For I am Christ's, and Christ is God's (1 Cor. 3:22–23). It implies that I am more than a conqueror through him who loved me, for neither death nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate me from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus my Lord (Rom. 8:37–39). How could they? Are they not all Christ's? Do they not all belong to the scheme of

things that is created unto him and that is all arranged to cooperate in the final revelation of him as my Lord in glory?

A sure comfort it is that I belong to him, for my relationship to him as my Lord is not my work nor of my choosing. It is of sovereign grace and absolutely of grace only. It is a relationship rooted in eternity, in the unchangeable good pleasure of the almighty God, for he is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. He ordained him Lord of all. It was God's good pleasure that Christ should be the firstborn of every creature and the firstborn of the dead, and that in him all the fullness should dwell. God predestinated his own people to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he should be the firstborn among many brethren. God gave me to his Son. He is my Lord from before the foundation of the world. God sent his Son into the likeness of sinful flesh and caused him to die for me, ungodly in myself, in due time.

My Lord purchased me at the price of his own precious blood. He established the unity between him and me by engrafting me into himself by a living faith through his Spirit. So I am assured that I belong to him and that nothing can separate me from his love. Christ, the Lord of life and of death, is my Lord forever; to him I belong with body and soul. And that is my all-sufficient and only comfort in life and in death.

The Heidelberg Catechism enumerates the implications of this relationship in detail. Christ the Lord is my faithful savior, who with his precious blood has fully satisfied for all my sins, so that he is my only comfort over against the present evil of my guilt and damnableness before God: I am justified. He delivered me from all the power of the devil, so that he is no longer my lord, I am no longer his slave, and sin has no more

dominion over me. Christ preserves me according to the will of my heavenly Father, so that no hair can fall from my head without his will, for Christ is my Lord, and with body and soul I belong to him.

Even more, Christ so governs me and all things—for he is Lord of all—that they must be subservient unto my salvation. Life and death, sin and grace, heaven and earth, the world and the devil, suffering and sorrow, and angels and principalities and powers—all things must work together for my good because I belong to Christ, my Lord. So this Lord of life and death, who is the firstborn of every creature and the firstborn of the dead, assures me of eternal life. Even in this life, which is nothing but a continual death, he assures me of life eternal in everlasting glory and perfection through his Holy Spirit. What a comfort! In the midst of guilt and condemnation I am justified, and I know that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. In the midst of my present sin and corruption I know that I am delivered from all the dominion of sin and all the power of the devil. While I still lie in the midst of death, I am assured of eternal life.

Gladly I acknowledge his lordship, not as a response on my part to what he did for me, but as the fruit of his work for me and within me, for he as my Lord makes me his subject and constantly makes me sincerely willing to live unto him. It follows that only in the way of this willingness to serve him with a thankful heart can I be conscious of his lordship and of my belonging to him, and that therefore outside of this way the only comfort in life and in death cannot be my conscious possession.

To this conscious possession of the only comfort in life and death, the Heidelberg Catechism refers in question and answer 2:

*How many things are necessary for thee to know, that thou, enjoying this comfort [or in this comfort], mayest live and die happily?*

Three; the first, how great my sins and miseries are; the second, how I may be delivered from all my sins and miseries; the third, how I shall express my gratitude for such deliverance.

One can possess this comfort in principle without enjoying it consciously or without having this comfort as the deep, motivating principle of his whole life. How often are we in our lives far below the standard of the first question and answer of the Catechism? Yes, we are Christians, and we belong to Christ. If we are asked, we confess it more or less hesitantly, and we believe that we have a comfort in death. But what becomes of living and dying in this comfort? Where is the manifestation of this happy life and death in our everyday walk and conversation? Where is it when we move about in the world, in our shop or office, or on the street; where is it in our home life?

Is the lordship of Jesus Christ really the dominating factor in our lives? You know better. If it were, the only comfort in life and death, that we belong to him, would actually occupy the only place in our consciousness. The reverse is often true: we have many comforts, and the *only* comfort is allowed to sink into oblivion, below the threshold of our believing consciousness. If it were the only comfort, we would always seek the kingdom of God and his righteousness first, believing that all things are ours, while now we are often foolish and seek the things below. If it were the only comfort, we would surely be more than conquerors, while now we often suffer defeat and

are afraid that the world will frown upon us. What then is necessary for thee to know?

Yes, comfort is also knowledge. Hence we can be instructed in this comfort by the word of God, and through instruction we can grow in the conscious and full possession of this comfort in life and death. Three things we must know, the Catechism teaches us, with the spiritual knowledge of faith: our sins and miseries and the measure of them; the way of our deliverance; and the expression of our gratitude according to the word and will of God.

Do not misunderstand the intention of the Catechism: it does not mean that we must first learn all about our sins and miseries, then come to the knowledge of our salvation, and when that is finished enter into the knowledge of how to express of our gratitude. The three things we must know do not successively replace one another; they are simultaneous. The Christian possesses this knowledge in its threefold fullness. Always he must know his sins and miseries; always he must know his deliverance; always he must know how to express his thankfulness to God for his deliverance. They are three indispensable elements of the one knowledge; they are the triple knowledge. Until the day of his death he must increase in this threefold knowledge; there is no end to it in this life. He never graduates. The more he grows in true spiritual knowledge along the triple line of sin, deliverance, and gratitude, the more he will approximate the high standard set up in the first question and answer and be able to say triumphantly, "This is my only comfort in life and death, that I belong to Christ my Lord!"