



Full product can be ordered by calling  
1-800-333-8300 or by visiting  
[www.FaithAliveResources.org](http://www.FaithAliveResources.org)

show me 

# sample

**Faith Alive Christian Resources**  
From CRC Publications

Property of Faith Alive Christian Resources. All rights reserved.

VOLUME ONE

Our  
Only  
*Comfort*

A Comprehensive  
Commentary on the  
Heidelberg Catechism

FRED H. KLOOSTER

V O L U M E O N E

Our  
Only  
*Comfort*

V O L U M E O N E

Our  
Only  
*Comfort*

A Comprehensive  
Commentary on the  
Heidelberg Catechism

F R E D H. K L O O S T E R

Lord's Days 1-19  
(Q&A's 1-52)



Grand Rapids, Michigan

CRC Publications wishes to thank Calvin Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids, Michigan, for a substantial grant toward the publication of this commentary.

Cover design: Ron Huizinga  
Internal design: Frank Gutbrod

German text of the Heidelberg Catechism from *Der Heidelberger Katechismus*, Jubiläumsausgabe 1563, 1963 (Essen: Essener Druckerei Gemeinwohl [Lippischen Landeskirche und der Evangelisch-reformierten Kirche in Nordwestdeutschland], 1963). Used with permission.

English text of the Heidelberg Catechism © 1975, 1988, CRC Publications.

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations in this publication are from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION, © 1973, 1978, 1984, International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Bible Publishers.

Faith Alive Christian Resources published by CRC Publications.

*Our Only Comfort: A Comprehensive Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, Volume One. © 2001 by CRC Publications, 2850 Kalamazoo Ave. SE, Grand Rapids, MI 49560. All rights reserved. With the exception of brief excerpts for review purposes, no part of this book may be reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission from the publisher. Printed in the United States of America on recycled paper. ♻️

We welcome your comments. Call us at 1-800-333-8300 or e-mail us at [editors@faithaliveresources.org](mailto:editors@faithaliveresources.org).

### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Klooster, Fred H.

Our only comfort: a comprehensive commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism / by Fred H. Klooster.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 1-56212-697-0 (2 vols.)

1. Heidelberg Catechismus. 2. Reformed Church—Catechisms—History and criticism.

I. Title.

BX9428.K57 2001

238'.42—dc21

2001023937

# Contents

## Volume One

Preface.....	11
--------------	----

### **INTRODUCTION: COMFORT (*TROST*)**

1 Comfort ( <i>Trost</i> ): The Theme of the Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 1 (Q&A's 1-2) .....	17
---	----

### **PART I: MISERY (*ELEND*)**

Introduction to Part I (Q&A's 3-11) .....	60
2 Comfort for Aliens in Paradise Lost Lord's Day 2 (Q&A's 3-5) .....	69
3 Comfort in Knowing Misery's Origin Lord's Day 3 (Q&A's 6-8) .....	95
4 Comfort in Knowing the Just and Merciful God Lord's Day 4 (Q&A's 9-11).....	121
Doctrinal Summary of Part I (Q&A's 3-11).....	138

### **PART II: DELIVERANCE (*ERLÖSUNG*)**

Introduction to Part II (Q&A's 12-85) .....	142
5 What Kind of Comforter? Lord's Day 5 (Q&A's 12-15).....	147
6 The Only Comforter: Our Mediator, Jesus Christ Lord's Day 6 (Q&A's 16-19).....	167
7 Comfort Through Faith Alone Lord's Day 7 (Q&A's 20-23).....	189

8	The Triune God and the Believer's Only Comfort Lord's Day 8 (Q&A's 24-25) . . . . .	233
9	God, My Father, Almighty Comforter Lord's Day 9 (Q&A 26) . . . . .	261
10	The Comfort of Our Father's Providence Lord's Day 10 (Q&A's 27-28) . . . . .	281
11	The Son of God: Our Only Savior, Deliverer, and Comforter Lord's Day 11 (Q&A's 29-30) . . . . .	305
12	Christ and the Christian Lord's Day 12 (Q&A's 31-32) . . . . .	345
13	Comfort Through God's Only Son, Our Lord Lord's Day 13 (Q&A's 33-34) . . . . .	379
14	The Astonishing Incarnation of the Son of God Lord's Day 14 (Q&A's 35-36) . . . . .	413
15	The Comforter Shouldered My Curse Lord's Day 15 (Q&A's 37-39) . . . . .	447
16	Our Mediator's Death, Burial, and Descent to Hell Lord's Day 16 (Q&A's 40-44) . . . . .	503
17	Christ's Glorious Resurrection Lord's Day 17 (Q&A 45) . . . . .	561
18	Christ's Ascension to Heaven Lord's Day 18 (Q&A's 46-49) . . . . .	587
19	Our Lord and Comforter's Rule and Return Lord's Day 19 (Q&A's 50-52) . . . . .	625

## Volume Two

20	God the Holy Spirit and Our Sanctification Lord's Day 20 (Q&A 53) . . . . .	655
21	One Holy Communion of Forgiven Saints Lord's Day 21 (Q&A's 54-56) . . . . .	675
22	The Comfort of the Resurrection and Life Everlasting Lord's Day 22 (Q&A's 57-58) . . . . .	717
23	The Only Way to Be Right with God Lord's Day 23 (Q&A's 59-61) . . . . .	735
24	Faith, Then Fruits—All by the Holy Spirit Lord's Day 24 (Q&A's 62-64) . . . . .	749
25	The Sacraments Lord's Day 25 (Q&A's 65-68) . . . . .	759
26	Baptism Lord's Day 26 (Q&A's 69-71) . . . . .	783
27	Baptism Is Also for Infants Lord's Day 27 (Q&A's 72-74) . . . . .	799
28	The Lord's Supper: Sign and Seal of God's Gospel Promise Lord's Day 28 (Q&A's 75-77) . . . . .	813
29	The Body and Blood of Christ Lord's Day 29 (Q&A's 78-79) . . . . .	835
30	How Does the Lord's Supper Differ from the Mass? Lord's Day 30 (Q&A's 80-82) . . . . .	851
31	The Keys of the Kingdom Lord's Day 31 (Q&A's 83-85) . . . . .	871
<b>PART III: GRATITUDE (<i>DANKBARKEIT</i>)</b>		
	Introduction to Part III (Q&A's 86-129) . . . . .	884
32	Gratitude for Deliverance and Comfort Lord's Day 32 (Q&A's 86-87) . . . . .	887



33	The Comforted Believer's New Life Lord's Day 33 (Q&A's 88-91).....	899
34	The First Commandment: The Law as the Rule of Gratitude Lord's Day 34 (Q&A's 92-95).....	915
35	The Second Commandment: Gratitude for Christian Worship Lord's Day 35 (Q&A's 96-98).....	937
36	The Third Commandment: "Hallowed Be Your Name" Lord's Day 36 (Q&A's 99-100).....	951
37	The Third Commandment Continued: Oaths and the Use of God's Name Lord's Day 37 (Q&A's 101-102).....	963
38	The Fourth Commandment: The Festive Day of Gratitude Lord's Day 38 (Q&A 103).....	975
39	The Fifth Commandment: Honor Parents and Authority Lord's Day 39 (Q&A 104) .....	985
40	The Sixth Commandment: Do Not Murder Lord's Day 40 (Q&A's 105-107).....	993
41	The Seventh Commandment: No Adultery or Any Other Unchastity Lord's Day 41 (Q&A's 108-109) .....	1003
42	The Eighth Commandment: Do Not Steal Lord's Day 42 (Q&A's 110-111) .....	1011
43	The Ninth Commandment: Do Not Speak Evil of Others Lord's Day 43 (Q&A 112) .....	1019
44	The Tenth Commandment: Do Not Covet Lord's Day 44 (Q&A's 113-115) .....	1027
45	Prayer: The Most Important Part of Christian Thankfulness Lord's Day 45 (Q&A's 116-119) .....	1039
46	The Lord's Prayer: Prologue Lord's Day 46 (Q&A's 120-121) .....	1065

47	The First Request: Hallowing God's Name Lord's Day 47 (Q&A 122) .....	1079
48	The Second Request: Your Kingdom Come Lord's Day 48 (Q&A 123) .....	1089
49	The Third Request: Your Will Be Done Lord's Day 49 (Q&A 124) .....	1103
50	The Fourth Request: Give Us Today Our Daily Bread Lord's Day 50 (Q&A 125).....	1113
51	The Fifth Request: Forgive Us Our Debts Lord's Day 51 (Q&A 126).....	1125
52	The Sixth Request: Lead Us Not into Temptation Lord's Day 52 (Q&A's 127-129) .....	1135
 <b>APPENDIXES</b>		
A	Some Difficulty with Q&A's 12-19 .....	1153
B	A History of the Apostles' Creed .....	1169
C	A Brief Doctrinal Survey on the Trinity.....	1205
D	Anointing of Priests, Kings, and Prophets.....	1215
E	Father, Son, and Gender .....	1225
 <b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b> .....		1232
 <b>GENERAL INDEX</b> .....		1243

## Preface

With wholehearted gratitude to “my faithful Savior” I am privileged to be able to present this work on the Heidelberg Catechism. The “little catechism” first published in Germany and dated January 19, 1563, has been a part of my life since I was young—just as it has been for many other believers for more than four centuries. But this “little” song of comfort became a big part of my life in 1963, when I introduced a seminary course on the Heidelberg in its four-hundredth-anniversary year. That experience changed my life. I had done some studying abroad in the Netherlands and in Switzerland prior to that year, but ever since then my life has been devoted in large part to studying the Heidelberg in its setting, becoming familiar with its history, and learning about its beautiful intricacies—all with respect to teaching it as a major confession of the church and as a beautiful testimony of our deliverance into the full life of gratitude granted by God through our Savior, Jesus Christ, and by the life-changing work of the Holy Spirit.

Many experiences in my life before and after that year helped to bring shape to this commentary. So I hope it is helpful to mention some of them here. Other such experiences are mentioned at times throughout these two volumes.

After graduating from Calvin Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan, in 1947, I was privileged to pursue further study at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia under Professors Cornelius Van Til and John Murray, just two of the many thinkers I have leaned upon in the compilation of this commentary. Then from 1948-1951 I had the opportunity to study systematic theology at the Free University of Amsterdam under Professor G. C. Berkouwer. During that time I also attended courses taught by Professors Herman Dooyeweerd and D. H. Theodoor Vollenhoven. In 1952 I was ordained as a minister in the Christian Reformed Church (CRC), and in 1956 I was appointed by the CRC synod as professor of systematic theology at Calvin Theological Seminary, where I taught until my retirement in 1988.

Five years after introducing the seminary course on the catechism in 1963, I had the privilege of spending a sabbatical year with my family in Heidelberg,

Germany. We lived in an ancient house on the hill above the city, near the castle where Frederick III, the elector who first published the catechism, had lived. Every morning when I went to my study, I could look out across the rooftops of the city of Heidelberg, and especially on the university and on the great Church of the Holy Spirit, where so much of the history of this catechism took place. As I walked the streets of the old city and used the library of the Ruprecht-Karls-Universität, the places and events and people of the catechism became very real to me. Throughout that wonderful year my family and I visited the cities, libraries, castles, and churches related to the catechism and the people who wrote it. I was able to hold rare first editions of the catechism in my hands and to read the books and manuscripts once read by Zacharias Ursinus and Caspar Olevianus. Much of the research represented in this commentary was done at the sites we visited that year. From then on, I used every sabbatical available to me (1976, 1981, 1985) for catechism research and writing, and I have devoted all of the years of my retirement to this work.

Besides the opportunities supplied by sabbatical studies, I gained insight into the Heidelberg Catechism by working with treasured colleagues on several translation and study committees. From 1968 through 1975 a team of us (Richard R. Wevers, Clarence Boersma, Edward J. Masselink, Stanley M. Wiersma, and myself) met weekly to produce a new English translation of the catechism. These linguists, theologians, poets, and friends were a major influence in my understanding of a document I thought I already knew. With minor changes, Synod 1975 of the CRC adopted the translation we worked on. A later review committee (Richard R. Wevers, Douglas R. Fauble, Donald Sinnema, Carl D. Tuyl, James Vanden Bosch, and myself) met from 1986 through 1988 to suggest changes regarding gender language and related translation issues in the Apostles', Nicene, and Athanasian Creeds. The English version of the catechism used in this commentary is the result of the work of these committees, and I thank all of my colleagues for their contributions to my knowledge and understanding of the catechism.

Shortly after retiring in 1988, I was further encouraged by colleagues and by Harvey A. Smit, Robert De Moor, and other staff members at CRC Publications to compile this commentary. Its main purpose would be to supply a comprehensive guide for students, teachers, and preachers based on the most current available resources and the most helpful historical scholarship to aid in catechism instruction today using the new English translation adopted by Synod 1988. With few other English resources on the Heidelberg widely available, it seemed a good idea to pursue this work. Calvin Theological Seminary generously granted financial support toward the publication of this work, and CRC Publications undertook the editorial, design, and production costs necessary to

see it to completion. A major role in producing this work was undertaken by Paul Faber, who edited the manuscript. He revised, edited, smoothed rough sentences and paragraphs, and with his enthusiasm encouraged me many times. I am deeply grateful to him for his professional expertise and constant support.

For all of the opportunities, encouragements, and gifts supplied to me throughout the years by Calvin Theological Seminary, by CRC Publications, and by the Christian Reformed Church, I am profoundly grateful. Serving the seminary and the church has been a privilege and a blessing through my professional life. For daily conversations for more than thirty years in the coffee room, the faculty room, and the classroom, I am thankful to my seminary colleagues. My many students in the seminary were likewise a constant source of instruction and delight for me, and I am grateful for their questions, insights, and shared enthusiasm in the catechism. I am gratified that so many of them continue to study and preach from the catechism.

Being able to share my faith and learning with my own family has been a particular joy for me. As a catechism teacher at Neland Avenue CRC in Grand Rapids, I had the special blessing of teaching the Heidelberg to several of my children and one of my daughters-in-law. I am also especially thankful for the support and help of my wife, Leona, who has worked as my partner for many years on this project.

Most of all, and together with all of these believers who have grown to appreciate the Heidelberg Catechism, I thank “my faithful Savior” for the work and opportunities and blessings he has given me to be involved in such a project for the sake of his kingdom. May it serve our Lord and King’s purposes as he sees fit to nourish and build up his body of believers, “the one holy catholic church, the communion of saints,” in the years ahead. *Soli Deo gloria!*

—Fred H. Klooster, 2001

I N T R O D U C T I O N

---

# Comfort (*Trost*)

# Comfort (*Trost*): The Theme of the Heidelberg Catechism

---

## LORD'S DAY 1 (Q & A's 1-2)

Q&A's 1-2 in German .....	18
Q&A's 1-2 in English .....	20
A Song of Comfort (Q&A 1).....	22
Comfort: The Catechism's Theme .....	25
Comfort: A Biblical Theme? .....	29
The Basic Meaning of "Comfort" ( <i>Trost</i> ) .....	33
"Your Only Comfort" .....	35
I Belong to Jesus Christ .....	37
Holistic Comfort .....	40
Theocentric or Anthropocentric? .....	42
My Heart I Offer, Lord .....	47
Comfort and Joy: A Threefold Knowledge (Q&A 2) ...	50
An I-Thou Dialogue .....	52
<i>Trost</i> and Toys .....	56

## 1. Sonntag

### Frage 1

#### Was ist dein einziger Trost im Leben und im Sterben?

Daß ich mit Leib und Seele, beides, im Leben und im Sterben, nicht mein, sondern meines getreuen Heilands Jesu Christi eigen bin,	Röm. 14:8 1 Kor. 6:19  1 Kor. 3:23
der mit seinem teuren Blut für alle meine Sünden vollkommen bezahlt und mich aus aller Gewalt des Teufels erlöst hat und also bewahrt	1 Petr. 1:18-19 1 Joh. 1:7; 2:2  1 Joh. 3:8 Joh. 6:39
daß ohne den Willen meines Vaters im Himmel kein Haar von meinem Haupt kann fallen ja auch mir alles zu meiner Seligkeit dienen muß.	Matth. 10:29-31 Luk. 21:18  Röm. 8:28
Darum er mich auch durch seinen Heiligen Geist des ewigen Lebens versichert und ihm forthin zu leben von Herzen willig und bereit macht.	2 Kor. 1:21-22 Eph. 1:13-14 Röm. 8:15-16 Röm. 8:14



**Frage 2**

**Wieviel Stücke sind dir nötig zu wissen,  
daß du in diesem Trost  
selig leben und sterben mögest?**

Drei Stücke:

Luk. 24:46-47; 1 Kor. 6:11  
Tit. 3:3-7

erstlich,  
wie groß meine Sünde und Elend sei;

Joh. 9:41; 15:22

zum andern  
wie ich von allen meinen Sünden und Elend  
erlöst werde;  
und zum dritten,  
wie ich Gott für solche Erlösung  
soll dankbar sein.

Joh. 17:3

Eph. 5:8-11; 1 Petr. 2:9-12  
Rom. 6:11-14

**LORD'S DAY 1****1 Q. What is your only comfort  
in life and in death?**

- A.** That I am not my own,<sup>1</sup>  
but belong—  
body and soul,  
in life and in death—<sup>2</sup>  
to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ.<sup>3</sup>

He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood,<sup>4</sup>  
and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil.<sup>5</sup>  
He also watches over me in such a way<sup>6</sup>  
that not a hair can fall from my head  
without the will of my Father in heaven:<sup>7</sup>  
in fact, all things must work together for my salvation.<sup>8</sup>

Because I belong to him,  
Christ, by his Holy Spirit,  
assures me of eternal life<sup>9</sup>  
and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready  
from now on to live for him.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>1</sup> 1 Cor. 6:19-20

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

<sup>3</sup> 1 Cor. 3:23; Titus 2:14

<sup>4</sup> 1 Pet. 1:18-19; 1 John 1:7-9; 2:2

<sup>5</sup> John 8:34-36; Heb. 2:14-15; 1 John 3:1-11

<sup>6</sup> John 6:39-40; 10:27-30; 2 Thess. 3:3; 1 Pet. 1:5

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

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

<sup>9</sup> Rom. 8:15-16; 2 Cor. 1:21-22; 5:5; Eph. 1:13-14

<sup>10</sup> Rom. 8:1-17

**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;<sup>1</sup>  
second, how I am set free from all my sins and misery;<sup>2</sup>  
third, how I am to thank God for such deliverance.<sup>3</sup>

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

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

<sup>3</sup> Matt. 5:16; Rom. 6:13; Eph. 5:8-10; 2 Tim. 2:15; 1 Pet. 2:9-10

# Comfort (*Trost*): The Theme of the Heidelberg Catechism

LORD'S DAY 1  
(Q & A's 1-2)

## A Song of Comfort (Q&A 1)

**C**omfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins" (Isa. 40:1-2). In the Heidelberg Catechism we have a masterful picture of the *only comfort*. The first question and answer of this catechism is a comfort song echoing the heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The opening question is asked in the second person: "What is *your* only comfort in life and in death?"<sup>1</sup> And the answer comes in the first-person singular: my only comfort is "that *I* am not *my* own, but belong . . . to *my* faithful Savior Jesus Christ. . . ." This answer, which goes on for three stanzas, is a song of praise and adoration, of joy and jubilation. To the beginner the entire answer may seem complex, but it is really a simple song. It's a simple yet royal song elaborating on the theme "I am not my own, but belong . . . to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ." This song is also the theme of the entire catechism. The "Amen" of the final question and answer (Q&A 129) echoes the joy and confidence rooted in the comfort of this first question and answer.

Many popular songs repeat their lyrics over and over. Not this song. Its words are carefully chosen, and each one is significant. The question asks about comfort: *your* comfort, your *only* comfort, a comfort *in life and in death*. And the answer states, in significant detail, "I am not my own, but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ." Especially significant here is that I belong "body and soul, in life and in death" to Jesus Christ. The rest of the answer spells out this relationship in three stanzas, each

---

<sup>1</sup>Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 1; 1988 translation based on the third edition of the German text as included in the Palatinate Church Order of Nov. 15, 1563, known as the *textus receptus* ("received text") throughout the world.

consisting of two parts. Because this stanza structure is not preserved in the current English translation, I will diagram it here (note the structure in the German text of Q&A 1):

- 1a He has fully paid  
for all my sins  
with his precious blood,
- 1b and has set me free  
from the tyranny of the devil.
  
- 2a 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:
- 2b in fact, all things must work together  
for my salvation.
  
- 3a Because I belong to him,  
Christ, by his Holy Spirit,  
assures me of eternal life
- 3b and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready  
from now on to live for him.

The first stanza above indicates why I belong to Jesus Christ: “He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood” (1a), and he “has set me free from the tyranny of the devil” (1b). The second stanza expresses the full security of this comfort: “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” (2a); his watching over me is so complete and effective that “all things must work together for my salvation” (2b). The third stanza rings with assurance and thanks: “Because I belong to him, Christ, by his Holy Spirit, assures me of eternal life” (3a), and he “makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him” (3b).

In this magnificent first question and answer the Heidelberg Catechism sings the song of the Reformation. The Reformation did not succeed publicly in Heidelberg until 1545, almost three decades after Martin Luther posted his “Ninety-Five Theses.” When the Mass was about to be celebrated near the end of that year, the worshipers in Heidelberg’s great Church of the Holy Spirit spontaneously began singing the Reformation hymn “*Es ist das Heil uns kommen her*” (“Salvation hath come down to us”). This song was an echo of Romans 3:28: “We maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.” A translation of this song, originally written by Paul Speratus,

chaplain to the Duke of Prussia, provides a clue to the joy with which those worshipers sang:

Salvation hath come down to us  
Of freest grace and love,  
Works cannot stand before God's law,  
A broken reed they prove;  
Faith looks to Jesus Christ alone,  
He must for all our sins atone,  
He is our one Redeemer.<sup>2</sup>

The singing of that song in Heidelberg on December 20, 1545, changed the life of the city. By the time another decade had passed, the spirit of the Reformation was dominant there, and eventually that spirit led to the publication of the Heidelberg Catechism in 1563. In this new song believers acknowledged that the comfort of belonging to their loving Savior leads to a life of thanks for his great redemption: “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” (A 1). That emphasis takes shape in one of the most striking features of the Heidelberg Catechism—the entire third part, from Q&A’s 86-129, is devoted to the Christian life of thanks. What a challenge that thanks-filled perspective presents! Christ’s complete deliverance is our *only comfort*.

It is difficult today for Protestants to imagine all that was involved in singing that comfort song in Reformation times. Before the Reformation, worshipers entered the great churches under the menacing gaze of sculptures of the last judgment. That design was intended to strike fear in all who entered, thus promoting the sacramental system of the Roman Catholic Church. The requirement of meritorious works created a life-and-death fear in sincere people. Even a recent pope spoke of the fear with which he faced the final judgment. Comfort and the assurance of salvation are foreign to those who seek salvation, even in part, through their own good deeds.

The Reformers rediscovered the *comfort* of Christ’s gospel, which led to songs of joy and praise. In contrast to the sculptures of medieval churches and cathedrals, the “entrance” into the Heidelberg Catechism carries the message of comfort, comfort “in life and in death.” This catechism dares to face the last judgment with comfort, asking, “How does Christ’s return ‘to judge the living

---

<sup>2</sup>From Catherine Winkworth, *Christian Singers of Germany* (New York: Macmillan, 1869), p. 123. See also *The Lutheran Hymnal* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1941), #377.

and the dead' comfort you?" (Q 52). By the Spirit's power, every Christian learns to sing the comfort-song of the gospel with faith's confidence and joy.

## Comfort: The Catechism's Theme

The first question and answer is not just the first of many; it introduces the catechism's main theme. The term "comfort," either as a noun or a verb, occurs in Q&A's 1, 2, 52, 53, 57, and 58 of the catechism. Answer 53 directly relates the work of the Holy Spirit to comfort: "He has been given to me personally, so that, by true faith, he makes me share in Christ and all his blessings, *comforts me*, and remains with me forever." Thus answer 53 expands on the last stanza of answer 1.

Use of the term "comfort" in questions 52, 57, and 58 is noteworthy because these questions deal with the last judgment. "How does Christ's return 'to judge the living and the dead' comfort you?" (Q 52). "How does 'the resurrection of the body' comfort you?" (Q 57). "How does the article concerning 'life everlasting' comfort you?" (Q 58). The catechism is serious when it asks, "What must you know to live *and die* in the joy of this comfort?" (Q 2). Each of the six Q&A's that include the word "comfort" is an elaboration of the song of Q&A 1.

Although the document uses the term "comfort" only in these six Q&A's, comfort is the underlying theme of every question and answer in the catechism. Zacharias Ursinus, who is probably the catechism's primary author, states that "the question of comfort is placed, and treated first, because it embodies the design and substance of the Catechism."<sup>3</sup>

One of the unique features of the Heidelberg Catechism is its central, unifying theme. Most catechisms of the Reformation period included discussion of four standard elements—the Apostles' Creed, the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, and the sacraments. The Heidelberg Catechism unites these standard catechetical components in an organic way. They do not just follow one another as beads on a string, as in Luther's catechisms. In the Heidelberg

---

<sup>3</sup> *The Commentary of Dr. Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism*, tr. G. W. Williard (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1954, 1956), p. 17—hereafter cited as *Commentary*. A 1990 preface prepared for the current edition of the Heidelberg Catechism in booklet form (Grand Rapids, Mich.: CRC Publications, 1988) states, "An old tradition credits Zacharias Ursinus and Caspar Olevianus as the primary authors of the catechism. All we know for sure, however, is that the Heidelberg was a team project. In his preface, the Elector [Frederick III] mentions no specific names but tells us that the theological faculty, the superintendents, and the chief officers of the Palatinate church all took part in the catechism's production. Of course, a team project usually relies heavily on one or two persons who prepare preliminary drafts. Most authorities believe Ursinus had this leading role in composing the Heidelberg Catechism, though some think it may have been Olevianus." Ursinus's familiarity with the inner workings and intentions of the text, as evidenced in his commentary on the Heidelberg, point to him as the catechism's most probable primary author.

Catechism all elements are woven together into a beautiful, harmonious tapestry. The central theme, comfort, is developed in a three-part design: through a discussion of our misery, deliverance, and gratitude. The summary of the law is included in the part on misery. The Apostles' Creed and the sacraments are placed in the part on deliverance. The Ten Commandments and the Lord's Prayer are in the part on gratitude. The authors of the Heidelberg Catechism have creatively woven traditional materials together into this grand design so that all features blend into the central theme of comfort. This demands that an expositor highlight the catechism's thematic unity within its diverse parts.

Although the Heidelberg Catechism is unique, and thus original, in its theme and structure, its content is not entirely original. Its authors made extensive use of other catechisms from the Reformation era. A careful study of earlier catechisms reveals that the Heidelberg authors gleaned a surprising number of ideas, phrases, and specific words from earlier sources.<sup>4</sup>

Even the emphasis on comfort was not without parallels, although making it the catechism's theme was unique. There's a hint of comfort in the Zurich catechisms of Leo Jud, which date from 1534 to 1538. In Q&A 73 of his Shorter Catechism Jud described the Christian religion as a joy. Comfort was more prominent, however, in the catechisms of the Polish Reformer John à Lasco. The earliest one was used in manuscript form in East Friesland in 1546 and published in London in 1551; it mentions comfort in connection with the Lord's Prayer, explaining the address "Father" as a "very special comfort in life and death" (Q&A 125), words that remind us immediately of Q&A 1 of the Heidelberg Catechism. Another question in à Lasco's catechism relates comfort to the confession that God is almighty (Q 127).

Another à Lasco catechism was published for the refugee church in London in 1553. This Shorter London Catechism refers to comfort in connection with the last four lines of the Apostles' Creed and may have influenced questions 57 and 58 of the Heidelberg Catechism. The comfort one derives from the sacrament of the Lord's Supper is also mentioned in Q&A 34 of the Shorter London Catechism.

Even more interesting is the Emden Catechism of 1554, which was based on three earlier catechisms of à Lasco. Its question 24 asks, "Where shall this poor, condemned man, made fearful by the law, seek comfort?" The answer: "Not in himself, or in any other work in heaven or earth, but through faith in the only

---

<sup>4</sup>M. A. Gooszen, *De Heidelbergsche Catechismus: Textus Receptus Met Toelichtende Teksten* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1890). For a brief survey see James I. Good, *The Heidelberg Catechism in Its Newest Light* (Philadelphia: Publication and Sunday School Board of the Reformed Church in the United States, 1914), pp. 39-101. See also Walter Hollweg, *Neue Untersuchungen zur Geschichte und Lehre des Heidelberger Katechismus* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1961), pp. 86-123.



mediator and Saviour Jesus Christ . . . who has revealed to us the doctrine of the Holy Gospel, by which God urges and impels us by that law as by a school-master.”

Some of the London refugees from à Lasco’s church were driven out of England by the persecution of Queen Mary I, who came to be known as “Bloody Mary.” After first fleeing to Denmark, northern Germany, and Frankfurt, those refugees eventually found safe haven at Frankenthal in the Palatinate, the German province where Heidelberg is located, in the spring of 1562. They brought their catechisms with them, and the Heidelberg Catechism reflects their influence.

Two catechisms attributed to Ursinus were also composed before the publication of the Heidelberg Catechism. Both contain the idea of comfort. The Large Catechism of 1561 begins with this question: “What firm comfort do you have in life and in death?” That question resembles the first one in the Heidelberg, but its answer is entirely different:

That I was created by God  
in his image  
for eternal life;  
and  
after I willfully lost this in Adam,  
God, out of infinite and free mercy,  
took me into his covenant of grace  
that he might give me by faith,  
righteousness and eternal life  
because of the obedience  
and death of his Son  
who was sent in the flesh.  
And that he sealed his covenant in my heart  
by his Spirit,  
who renews me in the image of God  
and cries out in me, “Abba,” Father,  
by his Word  
and the visible signs of this covenant. <sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Translated from the Latin text in August Lang, *Der Heidelberger Katechismus und vier verwandte Katechismen* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1907, 1967), p. 152. My student assistant John Medendorp and I prepared an English translation of Ursinus’s Large Catechism (1561) and the Small Catechism of 1562 in parallel with the Heidelberg Catechism.

The Small Catechism of 1562 was clearly a preparatory draft for the Heidelberg Catechism. Ursinus probably had the major hand in its composition, but it was undoubtedly also influenced by the Palatinate team that Elector Frederick III appointed to produce the Heidelberg Catechism.<sup>6</sup> The first question of this Small Catechism asks, “What comfort sustains your heart in death as well as in life?” The answer: “That God has truly forgiven all my sins because of Christ and has given me eternal life in which I may glorify him forever.”

Even earlier, in his inaugural speech of 1558 when he began his teaching career at the Elizabeth Gymnasium in his native Breslau, Silesia (now part of Poland), Ursinus referred to the “sweetest comfort.” He urged his audience to use a catechism by Philipp Melanchthon in order to understand the Christian faith. In that context he said, “Let us rather, with all submission and thankfulness, embrace this sweetest comfort by which we are assured that our labors please God.” In connection with trials that Christians face, Ursinus also referred to comfort in contrast to grief and unworthiness: “This comfort that, for the differences and inequalities of gifts and degrees, we shall not be cast off and suffered to perish, . . . must be opposed to the grief conceived upon our own unworthiness.”<sup>7</sup>

The comfort of Christ’s gospel was rediscovered by the Reformers of the sixteenth century. Luther, Melanchthon, and John Calvin frequently spoke of the believer’s comfort. The Belgic Confession of 1561 mentions the comfort God provides for those he rescues from the misery of sin. Many other illustrations could be given to show that the authors of the Heidelberg Catechism were influenced by such sources as well as by several other catechisms. The Heidelberg authors shared this rich recovery of the gospel message, but they surpassed all of their predecessors when they made comfort the theme of the entire catechism.

---

<sup>6</sup> See Frederick’s preface to the 1563 Heidelberg Catechism in the Palatinate Church Order; English translation in George W. Richards, *The Heidelberg Catechism: Historical and Doctrinal Studies* (Philadelphia: Publication and Sunday School Board of the Reformed Church in the United States, 1913), pp. 182ff. See Fred H. Klooster on “The Priority of Ursinus in the Composition of the Heidelberg Catechism” in *Controversy and Conciliation: The Reformation and the Palatinate 1559-1583*, ed. Derk Visser (Allison Park, Pa.: Pickwick Publications, 1986), pp. 73-100.

<sup>7</sup> James I. Good, *The Heidelberg Catechism in Its Newest Light* (Philadelphia: Publication and Sunday School Board of the Reformed Church in the United States, 1914), p. 66; see 247ff. See also Derk Visser, *Zacharias Ursinus: The Reluctant Reformer* (New York: United Church Press, 1983), pp. 74ff.

## Comfort: A Biblical Theme?

The Heidelberg Catechism may not be viewed as a document on the same level as Scripture; it is not a second source for the life of faith. And it certainly may not be seen as something *above* Scripture. The authors of the catechism claimed only to echo the Bible. Elector Frederick III, ruler of the Palatinate from 1559 to 1576 and spiritual father of the Heidelberg Catechism, was convinced that the entire catechism “word for word, is drawn, not from human but from divine sources, [as] the [Scripture] references that stand in the margin will show.” In his defense of the catechism before Emperor Maximilian II at the Diet of Augsburg in 1566, Frederick declared that “if any one of whatever age, station or class he may be, even the humblest, can teach me something better from the Holy Scriptures, I will thank him from the bottom of my heart and be readily obedient to the divine truth.”<sup>8</sup>

We must examine, therefore, whether the catechism’s theme is an authentic echo of the Word of God. It is always dangerous to select a central theme, for the gospel is as “wide and long and high and deep” as the “love of Christ,” a “love that surpasses knowledge” (Eph. 3:18). Is comfort a legitimate summary of the biblical message? Is it specific enough and adequately comprehensive?

There were undoubtedly other themes the authors could have used to set forth the riches of God’s Word for catechetical instruction. The covenant is certainly a central biblical doctrine, and it could serve as the theme of a good catechism. Ursinus himself used the theme of the covenant in his Large Catechism, as the quotation above indicates. Yet we can be grateful that Ursinus’s Large Catechism was replaced by the Heidelberg Catechism. Ursinus’s view of the covenant was inadequate; he limited the covenant to the elect and therefore the historical dimensions of the biblical covenant doctrine were suppressed. Nevertheless the covenant is a possible theme for a catechism.

Other biblical themes for a catechism could be suggested, such as creation-fall-redemption. This basic trilogy is also part of the Heidelberg Catechism, as Q&A’s 6, 7, and 19 indicate. Of course, the catechism could also have been composed without a central theme—as most catechisms were. Whatever other possibilities were considered, our task is to examine whether comfort is an authentic biblical theme that adequately summarizes the biblical message.

The Heidelberg Catechism does not cite any biblical passages to warrant its theme of comfort. As already noted, the term “comfort” occurs in six of the questions and answers, and biblical support is provided mainly for the catechism’s answers. Only once does “comfort” appear in an answer (A 53), and

---

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 193-194.

there the first edition listed only Acts 9 as biblical support. Since the German Bible had not yet been versified in 1563, the first German edition of the Heidelberg Catechism listed only chapter numbers in its biblical references. Acts 9:31 (as cited in the current translation) was probably intended. That verse refers to “a time of peace” enjoyed by the early church, a time when the church was “strengthened” and “encouraged [comforted] by the Holy Spirit.” This passage is relevant, but does it give adequate warrant to *comfort* as a theme that summarizes the biblical message?

Our questions as well as our answers must conform to the norm of God’s Word. Since the catechism includes no specific biblical support for its comfort theme beyond the reference to Acts 9 in answer 53, it is imperative that we face this question head-on.

The first biblical reference to “comfort” occurs in Genesis 5:29, where Lamech names his newborn son *Noah*, saying, “He will comfort us in the labor and painful toil of our hands caused by the ground the LORD has cursed.” In naming his newborn son *Noah*, Lamech prophetically looks ahead to the approaching flood that God would send as judgment on an almost universally sinful race (Gen. 6:5). Lamech spoke of “comfort” as he recalled the curse on creation (3:17) and considered God’s gracious intervention through Noah to keep the unconditional promise of victory for the offspring of the woman (3:15).

The word “comfort” was without relevance before the fall into sin. Comfort presupposes sin, evil, misery—all consequences of the fall, which we can describe with the well-known phrase “Paradise Lost.” The *idea* of comfort emerges in the mother-promise of Genesis 3:15—that first announcement of the gospel was a message of comfort to our first parents, Adam and Eve, who hid from God when they suddenly discovered their misery (see Q&A 19). The mother-promise, explicated in the rest of Scripture, is the first announcement of comfort for fallen humanity, as God declares to the serpent: “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.” That comforting message is the golden thread running through the entire fabric of Scripture. The Belgic Confession includes the word “comfort” in this very connection:<sup>9</sup>

We believe that our good God,  
by his marvelous wisdom and goodness,  
seeing that man had plunged himself in this manner  
into both physical and spiritual death  
and made himself completely miserable,

---

<sup>9</sup> Belgic Confession, Art. 17. The text quoted is from a new translation based on the 1619 French text of the Belgic Confession. This translation was adopted by the Christian Reformed Church in 1985.

set out to find him,  
though man,  
    trembling all over,  
was fleeing from him.

And he comforted him,  
promising to give him his Son,  
    “born of a woman,”  
to crush the head of the serpent,  
and to make him blessed.

The comfort of “Paradise Regained” through Jesus Christ is pictured near the close of the book of Revelation: “I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away’” (Rev. 21:3-4). That’s the picture of comfort perfected in “a new heaven and a new earth” (21:1). The *theme* of comfort runs therefore from Genesis through Revelation.

There are also several specific references to comfort that confirm it as a biblical theme. Earlier we quoted the well-known words of Isaiah 40:1: “Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.” The prophet who brings these “good tidings to Zion” (40:9) speaks of this comfort in the figurative language of a shepherd who comforts: “He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young” (40:11).

The entire “Shepherd Psalm” (Ps. 23) speaks of the comfort given by “the good shepherd” (John 10:11). That psalm specifically mentions the comfort of the shepherd’s rod and staff: “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me” (Ps. 23:4). This imagery, as we will show later, is especially significant in elaborating the root meaning of comfort in Scripture and in the catechism. Isaiah also uses the figure of the comforting mother: “As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you; and you will be comforted over Jerusalem” (Isa. 66:13).

The Old Testament prophets were God’s ministers to comfort his people: “The LORD will surely comfort Zion and will look with compassion on all her ruins; he will make her deserts like Eden, her wastelands like the garden of the LORD. Joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the sound of singing” (Isa. 51:3). Comfort brings song as one travels the winding uphill road

from Paradise Lost to Paradise Regained. The prophets pointed to the Great Prophet (Messiah) as one sent “to comfort all who mourn” (Isa. 61:2), and Jesus applied that great passage to himself in his inaugural sermon in the synagogue of Nazareth (Luke 4:16-21).

The prophecies of Isaiah reach their initial fulfillment in the promised Messiah, Jesus Christ. The New Testament opens with the account of Simeon “waiting for the consolation [*paraklēsīn*, ‘comfort’] of Israel” (Luke 2:25). After Simeon saw the babe and recognized him as “the Lord’s Christ,” he was ready to die in peace. “For my eyes have seen your salvation,” he declared (2:26-32). During his ministry Jesus showed himself as the “comforter of Israel” (2:25). In his beatitudes he declares, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted” (Matt. 5:4), thus fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah 61:2. In his parable of the rich man and poor Lazarus, Jesus states that Lazarus was taken by the angels to Abraham’s bosom, where he was “comforted,” while the rich man suffered misery and agony in hell (Luke 16:22-25).

The most comprehensive biblical references to comfort come from the apostle Paul. To the Thessalonians he wrote of “eternal comfort”: “May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement [comfort] and good hope, encourage [comfort] your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word” (2 Thess. 2:16-17). But the most remarkable passage is 2 Corinthians 1:3-7, in which Paul speaks of “the God of all comfort” (1:3) and repeats the word for “comfort” many times within five verses:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all *comfort*, who *comforts* us in all our troubles, so that we can *comfort* those in any trouble with the *comfort* we ourselves have received from God [or, with which we have been *comforted* by God]. For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our *comfort* overflows. If we are distressed, it is for your *comfort* and salvation; if we are *comforted*, it is for your *comfort*, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our *comfort*.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup>The Greek term here is *paraklēsīs*. Paul uses a form of this word five times in 2 Corinthians 1:3-4. The NIV translation absorbs the last of these five in the reflexive expression “we ourselves have received from God.” The NRSV translates these verses as follows: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all *consolation*, who *consoles* us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to *console* those who are in any affliction with the *consolation* with which we ourselves are *consoled* by God.” *Paraklēsīs* is also translated in terms of “encouragement” (Acts 9:31; Phil. 2:1).

In all these passages we read of trouble, suffering, distress, pain, and death alongside deliverance and hope; thus we discover the combination of misery, deliverance, and gratitude as the ingredients of comfort. Comfort certainly is a biblical theme. The authors therefore made a sound biblical choice when they made comfort the theme of the Heidelberg Catechism. We must now look more closely at the meaning of “comfort.”

## The Basic Meaning of “Comfort” (*Trost*)

What the Heidelberg Catechism means by “comfort” (*Trost*) is apparent, of course, in answer 1. The entire catechism goes on to explain the comprehensive scope of “comfort,” which goes far beyond a mere dictionary definition of the word. Not even a standardized definition of *Trost* provides the depth of the catechism’s biblical exposition on this theme. Some attention to the original meaning of these words will prove helpful, however—at least toward avoiding the superficial meanings that the words often convey today.

In today’s world the word *comfort* has lost its depth and power. Our consumer society has robbed the word of its meaning. When we think of comfort today, we usually think of comfortable homes, easy chairs, vacations, and rest. Comfort has come to refer to something cozy. One can spend a vacation night at Comfort Inn, relax with a glass of Southern Comfort, and snuggle up under a comforter (padded blanket). If you have brought along a catalog published by a firm named “Comfortably Yours,” you can covet several of the “aids for easier living” that promise a seemingly infinite variety of comforts. The catalog cover invites you to look through this “catalog of comforts” and promises that “you’ll find marvelous products for the bath and bedroom, for your personal health, safety and security, even for your pets. All selected with your comfort in mind.” At the same time one may not have the slightest inkling of what the Heidelberg Catechism means by the “only comfort.”

Comfortable rest in a hospital may be the result of a sedative drug, so some people may think the catechism is speaking of comfort as a spiritual sedative that induces peaceful sleep and rest. Comfort then becomes a spiritual painkiller.

In the catechism, “comfort” is the English translation of the German word *Trost*, so our study of what the catechism means by “comfort” must begin with the meaning of *Trost*. The New Testament writers frequently had to coin new words or give existing words new meaning to help people understand the gospel message. (Think, for example, of the Greek word *diatheke* to express the biblical sense of “covenant.”) The German word *Trost* similarly experienced a shift in meaning to meet the needs of Christian missionaries in Germany, and

Reformation usage reflects this shift. In the Heidelberg Catechism we find perhaps the best example of the deepened meaning of *Trost*.

The shift in meaning, which was really an enrichment of the word without loss of its basic sense, began to occur when Christian missionaries in southern Germany needed a German equivalent for the Latin *consolatio*.<sup>11</sup> According to F. Kluge, “This shift began around 700 and by the ninth and tenth centuries the usage followed the Rhine northwards,” paving the way for the Reformation centuries later to bring “the new Christian meaning of *Trost* throughout the north.”<sup>12</sup>

The root meaning of *Trost* (Dutch, *Troost*) is “certainty, protection.” *Trost* is thus related to the English “trust” and to such German words as *treu* (“faithful, true”) and *trauen* (“to marry”). The related old Gothic word is *trusti*, which referred to a treaty or a covenant. In the Gothic translation of the Bible, Ulfilas (d. 318) translated the Greek word for “covenant” (*diatheke*) in Ephesians 2:12 as *trausti*. Before their conversion to Christianity the Ephesians were therefore “foreigners to the covenants [*trausti*] of the promise, without hope and without God in the world” (Eph. 2:12). This usage indicates that the idea of trust, of certainty-outside-of-ourselves, underlies the root meaning of the word *Trost*. The trust relation of a king to his subjects and the protection involved in that relationship is rooted in this word. Notice this idea reflected in the catechism’s answer “that I am not my own, but belong . . . to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ.”

The English “comfort” is a good translation of the German *Trost* and the Latin *consolatio*—if we bear in mind the root meanings of the word. “Comfort” comes from the Latin *confortare* (from earlier Latin *com* + *fortis*, “with strength”), meaning “to strengthen greatly.” *Webster’s New International Dictionary* states that *comfort*, *console*, and *solace* are related; *comfort* is considered “the homelier, more intimate word,” which “suggests relief afforded by imparting positive cheer, hope, or strength, as well as by the diminution of pain.” Isaiah 61:1-2 is cited with this definition.

This meaning of *comfort* is suggested in the formal definition that Ursinus gave the term in his commentary on the catechism: “Comfort is a consideration of the intellect [understanding] whereby one places over against a present evil a present or future good which relieves the pain of the present evil and makes it bearable.” But that formal definition is preceded by a more satisfying description: “The substance of this comfort consists in this, that we are grafted into

---

<sup>11</sup> In the first official Latin translation of the Heidelberg Catechism, *Trost* was translated as *consolatio*.

<sup>12</sup> Friedrich Kluge, *Etymologisches Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache*, 17. Aufl. (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 1957), p. 793.



Christ by faith, that through him we are reconciled to, and beloved of God, that thus he may care for and save us eternally.”<sup>13</sup>

The root meaning of “comfort” is thus one of strength, fortitude, courage. The true sense of “comfort” is captured if one sings Luther’s Reformation hymn with the word “comfort” replacing “fortress”—“A mighty *comfort* is our God, a bulwark [fortress] never failing.” Psalm 46, the source of Luther’s hymn, is a comfort psalm. The “only comfort” of the catechism is “a mighty comfort.” The catechism speaks of one’s “only comfort” because the believer belongs totally to Jesus Christ. Because “I am not my own,” I am not alone! I belong to Jesus Christ. He is at my side now because he stood in my place at Calvary and “fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood” (A 1). In the words of answer 39, “He shouldered the curse which lay on me.” I have this “only comfort” because Jesus is also at my side now. He “has set me free from the tyranny of the devil” (A 1). He also watches over me in all things great and small and actually makes them work for my salvation.

These perspectives with respect to the words *Trost* and *comfort* are entirely supported—in fact, demanded—by the meaning of *paraklētos* and other forms of this word in the New Testament. The root meaning of this word is “to call to one’s side.” Jesus himself is called the *paraklētos* (“comforter”) in 1 John 2:1. He is the advocate who, like a defense lawyer, stands at our side to speak “to the Father in our defense” when we sin. Before his ascension Jesus promised to send “another Comforter,” the *Paraclete*, who would be his representative and agent for believers (John 14:16, KJV, ASV; see 14:26; 15:26; 16:7). The relation of the Holy Spirit to the believer is so close that this Comforter is not only *with* me but also dwells *in* me so that my body is called “a temple of the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor. 6:19; see 3:16-17; 2 Cor. 6:16; see also Q&A 109).

Comfort (*paraklēsis*) can also be brought by one Christian to another. One stands beside another person to encourage him or her in the Christian faith. Biblical examples of such human strengthening, fortifying, and encouraging are found in a number of passages: Acts 16:40; Romans 1:12; 2 Corinthians 1:3-7; 1 Thessalonians 3:2; 4:18; 5:11.

## “Your Only Comfort”

Some of the catechism’s questions are as instructive as its answers. The first question makes clear that Christian comfort is unique; it is the “*only* comfort.”

---

<sup>13</sup>*Commentary*, p. 17. “Ingrafted” has been changed to “grafted.” The preceding quotation is from the same page of Ursinus’s commentary, but the translation comes from J. K. Van Baalen, *The Heritage of the Fathers: A Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1948), p. 31.

The answer also implies this uniqueness, but the question makes it explicit: “What is your *only* comfort . . . ?”

The catechism does not present the Christian comfort as one of many—as if all or several are equally legitimate. One does not peruse a catalog of comforts before making a choice of the *only* comfort. Nor is it the case that the gospel reveals the highest and supreme comfort among many—as if Christian comfort is the best among a number of lesser comforts. Comfort in Christ is *the only* comfort. One either has comfort or is comfortless—really, basically, fundamentally. *The only* comfort meets the one human need, in which we recognize *the only* misery. *The only* comfort is anchored in *the only* way of deliverance—through Jesus Christ. *The only* comfort also produces *the only* way of gratitude.

The apostle Peter emphasized this exclusiveness of the Christian faith: “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). Jesus made it clear in his Sermon on the Mount: “Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things [food, drink, clothing] will be given to you as well” (Matt. 6:33). And in the great chapter in which he comforted the troubled hearts of his disciples, Jesus told Thomas unambiguously, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). That’s what the comforted and *Paraclete*-empowered apostle Peter also emphasized on Pentecost and afterward.

Every age devises its own substitute comforts. Every religion offers its own alternatives for *the only* comfort in Christ. But this comfort comes by the one way of deliverance through Jesus Christ, who meets us in our deepest need—in our sin and misery. It’s our *only* comfort.

The catechism makes the uniqueness and exclusiveness of this *only* comfort even more explicit. Question 1 asks, “What is your only comfort *in life and in death*?” The *only* comfort spans both life and death. It is also the *only* comfort for “body and soul.” The *only* comfort involves the whole person, body and soul, one’s whole history, in life and in death. The *only* comfort is *comprehensive*.

Our *only* comfort is the simple theme of the catechism. Because it is the theme, its full exposition requires a full exposition of the whole catechism. Rich and full as Q&A 1 is, it presents only an outline of the entire catechism. Hence one should not attempt a full exposition of every detail of the first answer; that would only duplicate what is still to come. A few obvious examples make that clear. That I belong to Christ is explicated in Q&A 37. That he has “set me free from the tyranny of the devil” is emphasized in Q&A 45. The Lord’s providential watching over me is movingly described in Q&A’s 26-28. Assurance of salvation is elaborated upon in Q&A’s 21, 53, and especially 69-79. The concluding words of answer 1 on gratitude are elaborated upon in

the remarkable third part of the catechism: Q&A's 86-129. They explain the Ten Commandments and the Lord's Prayer for the Christian life of thanks for Christ's deliverance and comfort. So, rather than duplicating the commentary on the rest of the catechism by explaining Q&A 1 in fine detail, we must try instead to capture the total impact of the first question and answer as it summarizes all that follows.

Anyone who attempts to preach a series of sermons on Q&A 1 makes a great mistake. The rest of the catechism provides for that series. Pointing out the catechism's theme of comfort, the first Q&A supplies the focus for the detailed exposition that follows. Therefore the best preparation for understanding the role of Q&A 1 comes from repeatedly reading the entire catechism. The preacher or teacher who begins with Q&A 1 must know where the rest of the catechism will lead. Secondary sources, including this commentary, can never take the place of the catechism itself. So if any reader of this commentary has not read the entire catechism itself, he or she should do so now. Better still—that person should read it five times from beginning to end. Then he or she will grasp the unique function of the catechism's first question and answer.

## I Belong to Jesus Christ

Let's turn now to examine the catechism's answer to the first question, "What is your only comfort in life and in death?" The heart of the answer comes in its very first part: "That I am not my own, but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ." I belong to Jesus Christ; this is my *only comfort!*

The comforted believer is not here engaging in psychological self-denial. Something much more significant is being expressed. Belonging to Jesus Christ is a matter of ownership with full legal and juridical connotations; Jesus is now my Lord (Q 34). "I am not my own" indicates that I do not belong to myself; rather, I belong "to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ." He owns me; I belong to him. And I belong entirely to him—"body and soul, in life and in death."

Yet this comfort involves more than ownership with legal, juridical implications. True, I have been "bought at a price" (1 Cor. 6:20), ransomed, redeemed. Israel's only Savior declared to the people of God, "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine" (Isa. 43:1; see 43:11). This is true for all believers. The good shepherd who laid down his life for the sheep knows them by name, and they know him (John 10:3, 11, 14-15). Because they are his, he gives them "eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of [his] hand" (John 10:28). This redemptive owner-

ship is a life union. We are united to Christ as branches to a vine (John 15:1-8). That union with Christ is the most precious implication of the catechism's first answer. Ursinus emphasized this truth in the very first paragraph of his commentary on the catechism: "The substance of this comfort consists in this, that we are grafted into Christ by faith, that through him we are reconciled to, and beloved of God, that thus he may care for and save us eternally."<sup>14</sup> As we shall see later, a believer's union with Christ is basic to our entire salvation, to every aspect of soteriology.

That is my comfort. I am not my own; therefore I am not alone. Christ is my strength in life and in death. He now stands at my side because he once stood in my place. The Spirit who now dwells in me has united me to him. That is the root meaning of comfort (*paraklēsis*). That I am *wholly* his is my *only* comfort. That is my song!

The heart of the answer given in those first lines is next expanded in the three stanzas (noted earlier) that complete the song of answer 1. The first stanza explains the actions of Christ by which I have come to belong to him: "He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood, and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil." The explanation refers to purchase and payment; yet this was not simply a business transaction in the marketplace but satisfaction for sin and atonement. It involved a juridical or legal action whereby I became Christ's own possession. I was redeemed, ransomed. The price paid was that of his own precious blood when he stood condemned in my place and then died in place of me on the cross. By that once-for-all sacrifice he "fully paid for all my sins" and made me completely his own. The implication of that answer is justification and adoption as God's children. "Our Lord Jesus Christ . . . was given us to set us completely free and to make us right with God" (A 18; see Q&A's 59-64).

By this work of atonement Christ fully paid for all my sins and "set me free from the tyranny of the devil." In fact, that is why he became incarnate, as the writer of Hebrews puts it: "Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death" (Heb. 2:14-15). In order to make me wholly his, Christ had to rescue me from the clutches of the devil; from Satan's tyrannical power I am also set free. That's why Paul urges believers joyfully to give thanks to the Father: "For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (Col. 1:13-14). If I were my own, I would be under the devil's tyranny. Now that I am Christ's and do not stand alone, I share his victory over the devil.

---

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

The second stanza of the song of answer 1 depicts the comfort involved in Christ's providential watching over me. He has not only paid for my sin and freed me from the devil's tyranny: "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." The authors of the catechism did not invent those words; Jesus himself gave that comforting promise (Matt. 10:29-31). God has again become my Father because of Christ, his Son, my Savior (Q&A's 26, 120). God's providence provides "good confidence" (A 28), and it occasions thanks.

Christ's watching over me is comprehensive and effective. It includes minute details like the hairs of my head, but much more as well. "In fact, all things must work together for my salvation," says answer 1 at the close of its second stanza. The confidence of Romans 8 is reflected here and throughout the catechism: "We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. . . . For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:28, 38-39). Paul has only expanded here the simple promise of Jesus concerning his sheep: "No one can snatch them out of my hand" (John 10:28), not even the devil! What a comfort to know that because I belong to him, "nothing will separate [me] from his love" (A 28).

In the third stanza of answer 1 the believer sings of the comfort that leads to assurance of salvation and to thanksgiving for deliverance: "Because I belong to him, Christ, by his Holy Spirit, assures me of eternal life. . . ." He who stood in my place in death and stands at my side in life has given me the Holy Spirit "personally, so that, by true faith, he makes me share in Christ and all his blessings, comforts me, and remains with me forever" (A 53). Again the fortifying character of comfort is evident. Christ's comfort makes one secure and strong. Romans 8:15-16 is the source of that conviction: "For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father.' The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children."

Christ, to whom I belong, gives me this assurance. Belonging to Christ—"body and soul, in life and in death"—is guaranteed because "he has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood, and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil." He wants me to know that eternal life is fully guaranteed to me so that I can be free from anxiety and strengthened by his comfort for his service.

That's where the last part of stanza 3 in this song brings us: "Because I belong to him, Christ, by his Holy Spirit . . . makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him." Christian comfort does not lead, as

some suppose, to rest, relaxation, and leisure. Comfort is not a sedative to induce sleep. Not my works but Christ's work has brought deliverance. Now my life gets a new perspective. I am released entirely from the need of doing anything to earn my salvation; Christ has fully paid, and I am now completely free to live the life of gratitude. Even the desire to give thanks is awakened in me by Christ through the Holy Spirit. This teaching has been suspected of leading people to indifference and wickedness. The catechism points in another direction: "It is impossible for those grafted into Christ by true faith not to produce fruits of gratitude" (A 64). The short conclusion of answer 1, in fact, is expanded into the whole third part of the catechism (Q&A's 86-129). There the Ten Commandments are explained in terms of the third use of the law—gratitude. And the Lord's Prayer is explained there because "prayer is the most important part of the thankfulness God requires of us" (A 116).

No catechism has surpassed the Heidelberg in developing this perspective on praise and thanks. It reflects the concluding chapters of Romans. In fact, it may be that the catechism's threefold division is patterned after the book of Romans. Paul introduces the gratitude section of that book with these words: "Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship" (Rom. 12:1). In a similar way Paul urged the Philippians, "If you have any encouragement [*paraklēsis*] from being united with Christ, if any comfort [*paramuthion*] from his love, if any fellowship [*koinonia*] with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose" (Phil. 2:1-2). Those words and the following ones in the same spirit introduce Paul's well-known injunction to pattern one's life on Christ's: "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus" (2:5; see 2:6-11).

The comforted Christian does not sit back in a cozy chair to relax in leisure; rather, one is motivated by this only comfort to live only for Christ. This comfort leads to the kingdom life of thanks to the great King who stood in my place and now stands at my side in his victorious kingdom. The comforted believer is Spirit-enabled to "seek first his kingdom and his righteousness" (Matt. 6:33), because this believer confesses, "I am not my own, but belong . . . to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ" (A 1). Comfort thus induces courage for everyday Christian living and fortitude for obedient service in God's kingdom.

## Holistic Comfort

The Heidelberg Catechism's theme, our *only comfort*, reflects the *solas* of the Reformation. This exclusive gospel comfort is all-inclusive. It has no rival. It is

comfort for all of God's children, rich and poor, learned and unlearned, ministers, elders, deacons, and all others. There is no other authentic comfort. Consequently this only comfort is also complete, whole, total. The wholeness of this only comfort is strikingly emphasized in the following thirteen ways:

(1) The question declares that it is the only comfort—exclusive and yet all-inclusive. (2) The only comfort is the whole comfort; this is evident in the fact that the comforted believer belongs completely to Jesus Christ: “I am not my own, but belong . . . to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ.” (3) The whole person—body and soul—belongs to Christ. (4) The whole person in his or her entire history—both in life and in death—is Christ's. (5) The believer belongs wholly to Christ because he made complete atonement; he has “fully paid for all my sins.” Further, (6) Christ brings complete liberation; he “has set me free from the tyranny of the devil.”<sup>15</sup> (7) Christ also watches over me in his comprehensive providence so that “all things must work together for my salvation.” (8) Full assurance of eternal life is also included in the wholeness of this only comfort. And (9) that assurance leads to wholehearted willingness to live my entire life for Christ.

A review of the complete answer discloses other aspects of the holistic comfort. (10) As the catechism's theme, the first answer summarizes the entire catechism. Further, (11) the first answer shows that comfort embraces the three main components of the catechism: misery, deliverance, and gratitude. That these components are implicit in answer 1 is made explicit by answer 2. Additionally, (12) the first answer indicates that the entire Trinity, all three persons, are at work in the Christian's comfort. While I belong to Jesus Christ, the Father and the Holy Spirit are also at work in this great redemptive provision of comfort. Christ watches over me in such a way that the will of the Father is accomplished. Assurance and gratitude are worked in me by Christ through “his Holy Spirit.” This trinitarian emphasis in answer 1 is a warning against a superficial choice of whether the catechism is christocentric or theocentric. One should, however, recognize that after Adam's fall, all God's blessings come to us through the mediator, Jesus Christ. Thus, (13) instead of debating issues christocentric or theocentric, one should recognize that this trinitarian emphasis shows that the catechism is christologically theocentric.

Yes, the only comfort is the exclusive comfort for the entire person in the whole of one's history. In this way Q&A 1 expresses several dimensions of the gospel rediscovered by the Reformation; some of these were described in the

---

<sup>15</sup> The completeness of this liberation is even clearer in the German: “*aus aller Gewalt des Teufels*,” which means, literally, “from all the power of the devil.” The single English word “tyranny” includes the meaning of the two German words “*aller Gewalt*” with their negative implications.

popular Latin slogans *sola Scriptura, sola fide, sola gratia, solo Christo, soli Deo gloria!* These phrases, usually rendered in English with the modifiers “only” or “alone”—“Scripture alone,” “by faith alone,” “through grace alone,” “through Christ alone,” “to God alone be the glory!”—express the wholeness and exclusiveness of strategic features of the gospel and thus complement the emphasis on the exclusive, whole, complete, or “only comfort” proclaimed in the Heidelberg Catechism.

## Theocentric or Anthropocentric?

A dilemma is faced if one is forced to choose between christocentricity and theocentricity as alternatives from which the catechism is to be understood. But one can avoid that predicament by recognizing that the catechism is christologically theocentric. We now turn to another dilemma that interpreters of the Heidelberg Catechism must face: Is it theocentric or anthropocentric? Should a biblical catechism emphasize *my* comfort or *God’s* glory? Since the Heidelberg Catechism takes the believer’s “only comfort” as its theme, it appears to some readers to reflect a human, anthropocentric, subjective tendency rather than a divine, theocentric, objective one. The question is complicated because the anthropocentric emphasis is reflective of Lutheranism while the theocentric emphasis is considered authentically Calvinistic. In other words, is the Heidelberg Catechism’s theme of comfort and its warm, personal tone indicative of an anthropocentric, Lutheran theology? Or is it genuinely Calvinistic?

The question has been posed in several ways, and many commentators have considered it. B. B. Warfield has raised the question in perhaps the most challenging way by contrasting the first Q&A of the Heidelberg Catechism with that of the Westminster Shorter Catechism. He sharply criticizes the Heidelberg for its subjective, anthropocentric concern with *our* selves, *our* comfort. A consideration of Warfield’s critique here may help us to understand the Heidelberg Catechism better.

Warfield’s criticism is expressed in the context of his claim that “no catechism begins on a higher plane than the Westminster ‘Shorter Catechism.’” He explains,

Its opening question, “What is the chief end of man?” with its answer, “Man’s chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever” . . . sets the learner at once in his right relation to God. Withdrawing his eyes from himself, even from his own salvation, as



the chief object of concern, it fixes them on God and His glory, and bids him seek his highest blessedness in Him.<sup>16</sup>

Warfield credits “this elevated standpoint” of the Shorter Catechism to “the purity of its reflection of the Reformed consciousness.” In contrast, many other catechisms, even of the Reformation period, begin with the question, “What shall I do to be saved?” According to Warfield, the prominence of that question reflects “a sort of spiritual utilitarianism, a divine euthumia.”

He turns to the Heidelberg Catechism as an example of this danger:

Even the Heidelberg Catechism is not wholly free from this leaven. Taking its starting point from the longing for comfort, even though it be the highest comfort for life and death, it claims the attention of the pupil from the beginning for his own state, his own present unhappiness, his own possibilities of bliss. There may be some danger that the pupil should acquire the impression that God exists for his benefit. The Westminster Catechism cuts itself free at once from this entanglement with lower things and begins, as it centers and ends, under the illumination of the vision of God in His glory, to subserve which it finds to be the proper end of human as of all other existence, of salvation as of all other achievements. To it all things exist for God, unto whom as well as from whom all things are; and the great question for each of us accordingly is, How can I glorify God and enjoy Him forever?<sup>17</sup>

Warfield raises an important issue in a challenging way. He seems to have a valid point, at least at first. The question “What is the chief end of man?” sounds more Calvinistic than the question, “What is your only comfort in life and in death?” The Westminster emphasis on the glory of God is certainly Calvinistic. When one discovers that the Westminster Shorter Catechism’s first question had its origins in Calvin’s Geneva Catechism, Warfield’s argument appears even more convincing. In Calvin’s catechism the minister asks, “What is the chief end of human life?” and the believer responds, “To know God” (Q&A 1). The minister then asks, “Why do you say that?” and the believer answers, “Because He created us and placed us in this world to be glorified in us” (Q&A 2; see Q&A 6). The Westminster Shorter Catechism’s first Q&A actually improves upon Calvin’s Geneva Catechism.

---

<sup>16</sup> B. B. Warfield, “The First Question of the Westminster ‘Shorter Catechism,’” *Princeton Theological Review*, 6, no. 4 (Oct. 1908), p. 565.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 565-566.

One could enter the discussion with Warfield by asking whether he has accurately depicted the alternatives. Does the Westminster Shorter Catechism's emphasis on the glory of God indicate what *God* does or what *we* do? The Heidelberg Catechism refers to what *God* does in granting me the "only comfort." The criticism about subjectivity is also questionable in this connection. "What must I do to be saved?" is a legitimate biblical question (Acts 16:30). The Lutheran emphasis on justification need not be any more anthropocentric than Paul's emphasis on justification by faith, which is God's action, rather than justification by works, which are futile human attempts.

One's answer to Warfield's charge will depend on an understanding of the entire Heidelberg Catechism. Warfield's comments appear superficial, and his observations do not reflect a fair analysis of the Heidelberg Catechism. Personally I think highly of the Westminster Shorter Catechism, and it is not my intention to turn the tables on Warfield and deprecate Westminster. Careful analysis will show that there is similarity between the first questions of the two catechisms, although on balance the Heidelberg fulfills the Calvinistic emphasis on the glory of God more consistently than Westminster does.

The Heidelberg Catechism is obviously more personal than the Westminster. That personal character does not make the catechism anthropocentric, however. A good catechism should be personal. The Westminster Shorter Catechism could easily be made more so. Suppose one asked, "What is your chief end in life?" The answer could then be: "My chief end in life is to glorify God and enjoy him forever." In my judgment that would be a significant improvement. Yet the form of the question does not itself decide the issue Warfield raises.

Nor does the reference to "comfort" make the Heidelberg Catechism anthropocentric or utilitarian, as Warfield suggests. We have seen that "comfort" in the Heidelberg Catechism is not a subjective or psychological concept. Notice also that the Westminster Shorter Catechism recognizes that we are "to enjoy [God] forever." Is there really such a great difference between *comfort* in the Heidelberg Catechism and *the enjoyment of God* in the Westminster?

Most important in response to Warfield, however, is the fact that in its first question the Heidelberg Catechism also refers to the glory of God. This touches on the heart of Warfield's argument, but he does not mention the concluding words of the Heidelberg's first answer: "Because I belong to him, Christ, by his Holy Spirit . . . makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him." Those words are like a germinating seed that bursts into full bloom in the third part of the Heidelberg Catechism. How could Warfield have missed that? After its first question the Westminster Shorter Catechism does almost nothing more with "the chief end of man." "To glorify God, and to enjoy him

forever” is crystal clear in the first answer, but it is not developed. In the Heidelberg Catechism, however, what is simply mentioned in the first answer is beautifully developed later in the third main part on gratitude. Thus the Heidelberg actually puts great emphasis on the Calvinistic theme of glorifying God.

Without doubt, God made us for his own glory. Our chief end should indeed be “to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.” The Heidelberg Catechism includes that teaching in Q&A 6: God created us to “live with him in eternal happiness for his praise and glory.” The glory of God also emerges from the comfort of the “life everlasting” in Q&A 58: the “already now” of eternal life contemplates the “not yet” of “a blessedness in which to praise God eternally.” However, the Heidelberg Catechism does not reserve the goal of glorifying God to the eschaton. After discussing the deliverance brought us by Jesus Christ, it turns to the third main part on gratitude, thus picking up the final words of answer 1. Q&A 86 introduces the part on gratitude comprehensively, indicating that “Christ by his Spirit is also renewing us to be like himself, so that in all our living we may show that we are thankful to God for all he has done for us, and so that he may be praised through us.” What we do in thanks to God also requires prayer for the grace to do it. The catechism interprets the request “Hallowed be your name” to mean, “Help us to really know you, to bless, worship and praise you. . . . Help us to direct all our living—what we think, say, and do—so that your name will never be blasphemed because of us but always honored and praised” (Q&A 122). That note of praise and glory to God is another thread that runs throughout the entire tapestry of the Heidelberg Catechism.<sup>18</sup>

The difference between the opening questions of the Heidelberg and Westminster Shorter catechisms can also be seen as the two different approaches that Calvin considered possible because of the interrelations of the knowledge of God and the knowledge of ourselves. The opening words of Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion* are well known: “Nearly all the wisdom [*sapientia*] we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But, while joined by many bonds, which one precedes and brings forth the other is not easy to discern.”<sup>19</sup> Calvin considered it legitimate to begin with the knowledge of our-

---

<sup>18</sup> Specific references to glorifying God are found in Q&A’s 6, 32, 43, 49, 58, 64, 88, 90, 99, 101, 102, 114, 115, 122, and 128. In the light of Q&A 86 the entire third part of the catechism, from Q&A’s 86-129, is embraced by the perspective of glorifying God.

<sup>19</sup> *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, tr. and annt. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill, *Library of Christian Classics* edition, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1.1.1—hereafter cited as *Institutes*.

selves and then to move to the knowledge of God. Pedagogical reasons, however—"the order of right teaching," or "good order in teaching"<sup>20</sup>—led Calvin to begin with the knowledge of God and then to proceed to consider the knowledge of humankind.

The differences between the *approaches* of the Westminster and the Heidelberg can also be seen as representative of the two possibilities Calvin considered legitimate. While we were created with the chief end of glorifying God, as the Shorter Catechism indicates in its Q&A 1 and the Heidelberg Catechism shows in its Q&A 6, after Adam's fall only the redeemed person is enabled to live to the glory of God. This is the perspective of the Heidelberg Catechism in the concluding portion of its first answer and in its long major part on gratitude. The comfort of the Heidelberg's Q&A 1 climaxes in the life of thanks and praise to the glory of God. Ursinus rightly observed, "For if we would glorify God in this, and in a future life (for which we were created), we must be delivered from sin and death; and not rush into desperation, but be sustained, even to the end, with sure consolation."<sup>21</sup>

In the fallen condition of the human race, no one actually glorifies God unless one lives in and enjoys fellowship with the Redeemer. The entire book of Job is instructive on that score. Even God-fearing Job could not glorify God when he ceased to enjoy God's fellowship. After the first round of testing, Job concluded with words of praise: "May the name of the LORD be praised" (Job 1:21). In the testing that followed, according to Job 2-41, such words of praise and glory faded from his lips; he put his hand over his mouth (40:4). Only when Job again enjoyed God's fellowship did praise break forth from his lips; then the testing reached a successful conclusion, showing that Satan was defeated (Job 1-2; 42). That is also the sequence in the Heidelberg Catechism; it moves from the believer's comfort and enjoyment of God's redemptive fellowship to the praise of God that comes from the thankful life of the redeemed.

Whatever differences there are between the Heidelberg and Westminster catechisms, Warfield was wrong.<sup>22</sup> One is not Lutheran and anthropocentric while the other is Calvinistic and theocentric. On the contrary, the Heidelberg is thoroughly Calvinistic, and its third part is one of the most successful efforts to

---

<sup>20</sup> *Institutes*, 1.1.3.

<sup>21</sup> *Commentary*, p. 20.

<sup>22</sup> Surprisingly, in another article also published in 1908, Warfield wrote that "the Heidelberg Catechism is no doubt a catechism and not a confession, but in its presuppositions and inculcations it is as purely Calvinistic as the Genevan Catechism or the catechisms of the Westminster Assembly." See "Calvinism" in *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, ed. S. M. Jackson (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1908) II:359-364; reprinted in B. B. Warfield, *Calvin and Calvinism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1931), p. 362.

depict the glory of God as the chief goal of redeemed (comforted-by-Christ) believers. To live up to this demanding confession is another matter. Even the exemplary Job, an Old Testament “Calvinist,” had difficulty living up to his confession. Only by grace can such a God-glorifying life be lived. As the Heidelberg Catechism indicates, “Christ, by his Holy Spirit,” enables me “from now on to live for him” (Q&A 1)—that is, “to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever,” as the Westminster Shorter Catechism puts it. In order “to live and die in the *joy* of this comfort,” as the Heidelberg says (Q 2)—or, in the words of Westminster, “to enjoy [God] forever”—one must know 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. (A 2)

The Heidelberg Catechism recognizes what it really is “to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.” Its emphasis on “*my* only comfort” issues in the glory of *God*.

## My Heart I Offer, Lord

The Calvin College motto and emblem (pictured below) provide a good illustration of the catechism’s theme, especially of the thanksgiving that arises from the “only comfort.” The imagery of the heart in the hand comes from Romans 12:1. As Paul moves to this ethical section of his letter to the Romans, he urges his readers, “In view of God’s mercy . . . offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship.” Calvin understood that because we are not our own, we must cease to live for ourselves, and that because we belong to Christ, we must devote our lives to his service.



When William Farel insisted that God wanted Calvin to serve his kingdom in Geneva, Calvin reluctantly agreed. In a letter to Farel in 1540 Calvin stated that he would rather do anything than work in Geneva. Yet he recognized that he was not free to follow his own predilections: “Because I know that I am not

my own lord, I offer my consecrated heart as a sacrifice to my Lord.” Those words became the center of the seal attributed to Calvin and used by Reformed organizations throughout the world: “My heart I offer to you, O Lord, promptly and sincerely” (*Cor meum tibi offero Domine, prompte et sincere*).

In his critique of the Roman Mass, Calvin referred to “the living sacrifice” of believers. Echoing 1 Corinthians 3:16 and Romans 12:1, he indicated that such sacrifices include “all the duties of love” as well as “all our prayers, praises, thanksgivings, and whatever we do in the worship of God.” He explained,

All these things finally depend upon the greater sacrifice, by which we are consecrated in soul and body to be a holy temple to the Lord [1 Cor. 3:16, etc.]. For it is not enough for our outward acts to be applied to his service; but first ourselves and then all that is ours ought to be consecrated and dedicated to him, so that all that is in us may serve his glory and may zealously aspire to increase it.

This kind of sacrifice has nothing to do with appeasing God’s wrath, with obtaining forgiveness of sins, or with meriting righteousness; but is concerned solely with magnifying and exalting God. For it cannot be pleasing and acceptable to God, except from the hands of those whom he has reconciled to himself by other means, after they have received forgiveness of sins, and he has therefore absolved them from guilt.<sup>23</sup>

Calvin expressed these views elsewhere in words that are echoed in the first Q&A of the Heidelberg Catechism. The structural symmetry of Calvin’s statement is immediately recognized in the lines that follow:

We are not our own:

let not our reason nor our will,  
therefore, sway our plans and deeds.

We are not our own:

let us therefore not set it as our goal  
to seek what is expedient for us according  
to the flesh.

We are not our own:

in so far as we can, let us therefore  
forget ourselves and all that is ours.

---

<sup>23</sup> *Institutes*, 4.18.16.

Conversely, we are God's:

let us therefore live for him  
and die for him.

We are God's:

let his wisdom and will therefore  
rule all our actions.

We are God's:

let all the parts of our life accordingly  
strive toward him as our only lawful goal [Rom. 14:8; cf. 1 Cor.  
6:19].<sup>24</sup>

Indeed, the only comfort leads to the living sacrifice symbolized by the heart in the believer's hand dedicated in thanks to God for Christ's deliverance from sin's misery.

We have discussed the only comfort here and in preceding sections because it provides a unique challenge to those who confess their faith in the words of the Heidelberg Catechism. Warfield's (mis)understanding of Q&A 1 alerts us to a danger that is far too common. Too often the only comfort is understood simply as providing inward peace and personal solace. All who use this catechism must give adequate attention to the final words of answer 1. Those who emphasize the glory of God should also relate that goal to loving one's neighbor and promoting the kingdom of God.

Doctrine and life are intimately bound together. The biblical teachings confessed as our only comfort must affect our personal and social practices. The only comfort does relate to personal faith but thereby also to church, school, society, and state—indeed, to each and every facet of life. It concerns business, industrial, social, economic, and political matters. Racial issues, poverty, abortion, and all other current problems are included. The final words of answer 1 as elaborated in the gratitude part of the catechism will provide an occasion for detailed address to such issues. These social, economic, and political subjects become concrete in exposition of the Ten Commandments. Biblical doctrine is basic to the whole of Christian living. The only comfort, if authentic and genuine, produces courage for living the whole of life according to the Word of God, and it fortifies believers for promoting the justice and *shalom* of God's kingdom by means of the powerful grace of Christ. Teachers and preachers must be alert to this opportunity and challenge. The only comfort promotes God's kingdom!

---

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.7.1.

## Comfort and Joy: A Threefold Knowledge (Q&A 2)

The second question of the Heidelberg Catechism asks, “What must you know to live and die in the joy of this comfort?” Although this question is also personal—“What must *you* know . . . ?”—it is significantly different from the first. One writer regards it as a “cold shower” after the heartwarming song of answer 1. The literal German text here sounds even more chilling than the English translation, asking, “How many things [*Stücke*] must you know . . . ?” The reference to *Stücke*, which literally means “pieces, bits, parts, fragments,” may remind one of a broken cookie. K. J. Popma wonders whether it doesn’t sound somewhat scholastic. He asks, in effect, *Are we now going to start counting after we have been singing? Is this churchly mathematics?*<sup>25</sup> The catechism does move from the mountain peak of the first question and answer to the valley of the second.

Not every part of the catechism is as significant or stirring as Q&A 1. The catechism is a human product, and however successful it may be in general, it certainly is not perfect. There may have been a more appealing way to put the second question, but that doesn’t mean it is without catechetical merit.

The function of Q&A 2 is primarily pedagogical. It simply draws out the three elements implicit in Q&A 1 that form the three main parts of the catechism—misery, deliverance, and gratitude. That’s the useful pedagogical role of this question and answer.

Yet Q&A 2 also highlights an element that was not mentioned in Q&A 1. Question 2 refers to living and dying *in the joy*<sup>26</sup> of the only comfort. It asks, “What must you *know* to live and die *in the joy* of this comfort?” This question informs as it inquires. “In the joy of this comfort” is also paralleled in the concluding words of Q&A 1 of the Westminster Shorter Catechism: “and to enjoy [God] forever.”

Notice that the Heidelberg’s second question also asks what one must *know*. In other words, “What must you *know*” in life and in death to sing the song of your only comfort? People often sing songs without knowing what they are singing. The catechism does not sanction that. It wants those who sing of their only comfort to know how to live and die in the joy of that comfort.

The authors of the catechism lived in Heidelberg, a city nestled in a small valley along the Neckar River between the *Heiligenberg*, or holy mountain, and the *Koningsstuhl*, or king’s seat, on whose lower slopes stood Elector

---

<sup>25</sup> K. J. Popma, *Levensbeschouwing: Opmerkingen naar aanleiding van de Heidelbergse Catechismus* (Amsterdam: Buijten & Schipperheijn, 1958), I:38.

<sup>26</sup> The German here is “*selig leben und sterben*”—which literally means “blessedly . . .” or “happily . . .” or “joyfully to live and die.”



Frederick's castle. The authors knew firsthand that a Christian does not live life continually on the mountaintops or in the security of a castle. As in Heidelberg, life is generally lived in the valley. That was true in 1563, and it is true today—even when one knows the only comfort. It may be easier to sing the song of comfort on mountaintops, in cathedrals, and in castles than in the midst of the struggles of everyday life. The pain of death and the reality of a funeral can certainly make it more difficult to rejoice. Similarly the form of Q&A 2 may not be as inspiring as the form of Q&A 1 in the Heidelberg Catechism, but this second question *is* realistic. We must learn that the only comfort is indeed the source of real joy for life and death. As Joy Davidman writes, “We are in danger of forgetting that God is not only a comfort but a joy. He is the source of all pleasures; he is fun and laughter, and we are meant to enjoy him. Otherwise our Christianity is no better than the cannibal’s.”<sup>27</sup>

“What must you know . . . ?” This question does not imply that Q&A 1 deals with something you *feel* while Q&A 2 deals with something you *know*. On the contrary, knowledge is inherent in comfort. Comfort is much more than feeling. The knowledge referred to here is not mere head knowledge. One could pass a test on the catechism questions and yet not be able “to live . . . in the joy of [the only] comfort.” The knowledge that Q&A 2 is referring to here is the heart knowledge, the faith knowledge, of which Jesus spoke in his high-priestly prayer to the Father: “Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent” (John 17:3). Comfort is rooted in the knowledge of God; this heart knowledge brings comfort. Faith and life, doctrine and comfort are intertwined. To enjoy comfort, one must know the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The answer to question 2 mentions three things: misery, deliverance, and gratitude. I must know “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.” These are not three separate or isolated elements. One cannot be one-third or two-thirds comforted. You are either comforted or you are not, and true comfort involves knowing your misery, deliverance, and gratitude—all three at once. One does not really know one’s misery unless one is delivered from it. And one cannot really be thankful unless one is delivered through Christ. These are the three inseparable components of Christian comfort, a three-in-oneness, a threefold knowledge.<sup>28</sup> Heart knowledge of misery, deliv-

---

<sup>27</sup> Joy Davidman, *Smoke on the Mountain: The Ten Commandments in Terms for Today* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1955), p. 16.

<sup>28</sup> Herman Hoeksema’s *The Triple Knowledge: An Exposition of the Heidelberg Catechism*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1970), not only fails to emphasize the three-in-oneness of answer 2, but the title’s emphasis on knowledge rather than comfort also reflects his intellectualistic, even rationalistic, approach to the catechism. See my review in *Calvin Theological Journal* 8 (1973), 204-208.

erance, and gratitude is basic to comfort; comfort results from heart knowledge of misery, deliverance, and gratitude. When one *knows* these three in this way, one will be able “to live and die in the joy of this comfort.”

The sources of this threefold division of the catechism are not clear. Paul’s letter to the Romans is generally considered the basic source. After the introduction (Rom. 1:1-17), the first section of the letter (1:18-3:20) depicts the universal sinfulness of the human race—“for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,” as the apostle says in 3:23. Against the background of that account of human sin and misery, Paul’s second section (3:21-11:36) describes the way of deliverance, the righteousness that comes from Christ through faith: “But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe” (3:21-22). Romans concludes with Paul’s challenge to the redeemed to present themselves as “living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God” (12:1), including ethical guidelines for this life of thanks. The letter’s concluding words are these: “To the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen” (16:27). In view of the strategic significance of this letter for Martin Luther and, indeed, for the entire Reformation, it’s possible that Romans provided the pattern for the threefold division of the Heidelberg Catechism.

That threefold pattern was already present in a small catechism originally published in Regensburg. Nicolaus Gallus (Hahn) (1516-1570), a Lutheran Reformer of Regensburg, wrote a small booklet for instruction in the faith with these three divisions: the law, including sin and penitence; the gospel, or faith; and good works. This small catechism was certainly known to the authors of the Heidelberg Catechism, since it was republished in Heidelberg in 1558 by John Khole.<sup>29</sup> There may have been other sources that contributed to the Heidelberg Catechism’s theme and divisions, but little is known beyond the facts presented here. The Small Catechism of 1562, attributed to Ursinus but likely part of the team project that produced the Heidelberg Catechism, also employed the threefold pattern. Traces of that pattern were also present in Ursinus’s Large Catechism of 1561.

## An I-Thou Dialogue

Who asks the questions of the Heidelberg Catechism, and who answers them? This query deserves our attention as we peer into the catechism’s opening statements.

---

<sup>29</sup> Good, *The Heidelberg Catechism in Its Newest Light*, p. 47.

The answer seems obvious. The church of Jesus Christ is asking the questions in order to teach its children. The church is catechizing its covenant youth. The questions are being asked by the body of believers—but not because they do not know the answers. They do; they are instructing baptized children in the basics of the Christian faith. The comfort that mature believers already know is being communicated to covenant children. The church, then, instructed by the Word of God and led by the Spirit of God, asks its covenant youth, “What is your only comfort in life and in death?” and, “What must you know . . . ?” The answers, which a child is taught to give, are those which the church knows in faith and teaches in faith.

A faith dialogue is going on in Christ’s church between its confessing members and its not-yet-confessing, baptized members. Covenant children are not alone. Belonging to Christ means that Christ instructs such children in his church, within “the communion of saints” (see Q&A’s 54-55).

Both the questions and the answers of the catechism are the response of faith to the self-revealing, triune God. The dialogue, then, is an I-Thou dialogue that occurs between God and his children through the inscripturated Word. The personal questions and answers are not individual or individualistic. The individual is personally a member of the church, of the communion of the saints, of the believing covenant community. All together and each one must be in personal fellowship with the triune God.

In this context the believing congregation through its officers instructs its youth. And the children learn to respond in faith. Though the question-answer procedure may be Socratic, no Socratic theory of knowledge underlies it. The child is not one who already knows the answers in the sense that only a Socratic midwife is needed to bring to birth ideas already latent in the mind or soul.<sup>30</sup> If anyone countered this claim with the observation that many an instructed child is already a believer who knows the heart of the answer even though he or she stumbles to master the wording of the answer, I would agree. Yet even that child who already “knows”—and the variations will be considerable in a group of catechumens—receives that kernel of truth from the Word of God and not from some hidden depths of one’s own existence.

These considerations also illustrate the deep roots of the words “I am not my own, but belong . . . to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ.” Everything a covenant child already knows about the only comfort has its source in Jesus Christ. Yet that very comfort requires instruction and elaboration in order for a covenant child “to live and die in the joy of this comfort.” That’s why the

---

<sup>30</sup> See Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, tr. H. V. Hong (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1962), pp. 16ff.

Palatinate Church Order of November 1563 placed the new Heidelberg Catechism between the forms for baptism and the Lord's Supper. By means of instruction through the catechism, baptized children of the covenant were to be brought, by grace, to that measure of Christian maturity that enabled them to confess their faith and join believers in the covenant supper in communion with the Christ to whom they belonged—"body and soul, in life and in death."

But it is not only a child who needs such instruction. The entire congregation needs ongoing instruction. All believers, regardless of age, remain children in the kingdom of heaven. The confessing congregation instructs the children, but mature believers are themselves learning in the course of instructing the children. Catechism preaching found its way into the Reformed churches for that purpose.

In this connection it is instructive to observe that the catechism was originally designed to serve multiple functions. In his preface to the first edition, Elector Frederick III stated clearly that his primary purpose in commissioning the catechism was that "it is essential that our youth be trained in early life, and above all, in the pure and consistent doctrine of the holy Gospel, and be well exercised in the proper and true knowledge of God" (p. 8).<sup>31</sup> As Palatinate prince, he regarded this as his "high obligation, and as the most important duty of our government"; therefore he arranged for the preparation of the catechism so that "the youth in churches and schools may be piously instructed in such Christian doctrine, and be thoroughly trained therein" (p. 9).

But this was not Frederick's only aim. In addition to serving as a *catechetical tool*, said Frederick, the catechism was also to serve as a *preaching guide* by which ministers were to instruct the common people so that their knowledge could grow and their convictions deepen. Further, the catechism was to serve as a *form for confessional unity* so that all would "teach, and act, and live in accordance with" the catechism (p. 10). Frederick affectionately admonished "all and each of our superintendents, pastors, preachers, officers of the church, and schoolmasters" (p. 3) to accept the catechism thankfully and to "diligently and faithfully represent and explain the same according to its true import" with the aim of "the honor of God and our subjects, and also for the sake of your own soul's profit and welfare" (p. 10). The elector expressed all these intentions with "the assured hope, that if our youth in early life are earnestly instructed and educated in the Word of God, it will please almighty God also to grant reformation of public and private morals, and temporal and eternal welfare" (pp. 10-11).

---

<sup>31</sup> English translation in George W. Richards, *The Heidelberg Catechism: Historical and Doctrinal Studies* (Philadelphia: Publication and Sunday School Board of the Reformed Church in the United States, 1913), pp. 183ff. This quotation and others immediately following include page numbers from Frederick's preface to the 1563 Heidelberg Catechism in the Palatinate Church Order.

These three primary functions of the catechism led to two additional roles. Ursinus used it in his theological lectures for ministers; his commentary on the catechism resulted from those lectures. The catechism also served a liturgical role. In the new church order the catechism was divided into ten units (*Lectio*); one unit was read in every Sunday morning worship service. The purpose was to make the people better acquainted with the catechism by pulpit reading in its entirety every ten weeks while the division into Lord's Days provided for an annual cycle of sermons. Thus Frederick's little catechism originally served catechetical, kerygmatic, creedal-confessional, theological-pedagogical, and liturgical functions. Remarkable is the fact that it is serving these same purposes more than four centuries later. In all these varied functions the church of Jesus Christ, a fellowship of believers, still asks these basic questions and gives these biblical answers.<sup>32</sup>

By its warm, personal tone the Heidelberg Catechism promotes this dialogue between the one who asks questions and the one who answers. Most of the answers are presented in the first person. A variety of expressions have been used to describe this feature—"a synthesis of personal warmth and intellectual clarity," "an existential approach," "anthropocentric and subjectivistic." Not all such designations are meant to be complimentary, and none is entirely adequate. One who knows the catechism immediately recognizes its virtues. An I-Thou dialogue is going on, a dialogue between the younger and older members of Christ's church and—more important—a dialogue between God himself and his children. This I-Thou dialogue, so highly praised in dialectical theology, is present in this sixteenth-century catechism without the pitfalls present in the personalistic theologies of Ebner, Buber, Brunner, or Barth. The catechism is personal and existential without falling into the dungeon of existentialism as Bultmann, Ebeling, and Fuchs do. In their theologies one can talk only with oneself.

This catechism is personal and doctrinal at the same time; it conveys truth that calls for heart knowledge. Here doctrine is wedded to the warm, personal, vital mode of communication. Notice, for example, how this occurs in such questions as

---

<sup>32</sup>The Synod of Dort (1618-1619) endorsed preaching on the Heidelberg Catechism. The church order of the Christian Reformed Church requires that "at one of the services each Lord's Day, the minister shall ordinarily preach the Word as summarized in the Heidelberg Catechism, following its sequence" (Art. 54b). B. B. Warfield said that "two things keep the small Christian Reformed Church straight in the midst of a crooked ecclesiastical world, its Catechism preaching and its catechetical instruction of their youth." Quoted from J. K. Van Baalen, *The Heritage of the Fathers: A Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1948), p. 25.

“What is your only comfort . . . ?” (Q 1)

“What do you believe . . . ?” (Q 26)

“But why are you called a Christian?” (Q 32)

“What do you believe concerning ‘the holy catholic church’?” (Q 54)

What comfort, what profit, what benefits are yours? That’s the style of the catechism’s questions. Its answers are also personal, dynamic, and involved even as they convey some of the most complex doctrinal issues.

Yet such virtues of the catechism may become dangers if one is not attentive. If one repeats such personal answers without really believing, new problems arise. The catechism’s answers can only be given in faith. The instructor must always keep that in mind. The respondent must be challenged to personal involvement in faith. The danger of mouthing the words without embracing them in faith amounts to misuse of God’s name and bearing false witness and can lead to desecrating the table of the Lord (Ex. 20:7, 16; 1 Cor. 11:27-29; see Q&A’s 81-82, 99-100, 112).

What then of the catechism’s use in missions or evangelism to unbelievers? As a matter of fact, the catechism has frequently been used in mission work. Many translations of the Heidelberg Catechism into other languages were prepared by Dutch colonial missionaries who shared their precious faith with the people they first contacted through conquest and commerce. The catechism’s use in the great mission and evangelistic task of the Christian church should be acknowledged with thanks. Here, too, one must recognize that only a believer can really give the answers to this catechism. If such faith is absent, the answers may become only academic exercises, and a “dead orthodoxy” (really a contradiction in terms!) can result, fostering nominal Christianity. Let every preacher and teacher therefore be alert to the highly personal tone of this catechism and insure that one’s preaching and teaching personally reflect the only comfort of which the catechism speaks. Let not the virtues of the catechism, through our sloth, become the occasion for vices that are often neighbors of virtue.

## *Trost* and Toys

As we noted earlier, *Trost*, comfort, is the theme of Q&A’s 1 and 2 and of the entire Heidelberg Catechism. Let’s conclude this chapter with an illustration that may serve as a parable.

The ancient Church of the Holy Spirit in Heidelberg, Germany, stands like a giant above the tiled roofs of old Heidelberg. It was already there when the Heidelberg Catechism was published in 1563. After walking through the inte-

rior of that somber Gothic church, one exits on Main Street and sees directly across the street a small toy shop with the name *Trost*, probably the name of its original owners.

That *Trost* toy store has become part of a parable for me. The *Trost* of toys contrasts strongly with the *Trost* of the catechism. Children pull their parents into the store for a closer look at the toys displayed in the window. Will parents and children also enter Christ's Church of the Holy Spirit in Heidelberg to hear about the only *Trost*? If they do enter, will they hear the preacher proclaiming the only comfort of Christ's gospel? What about in the other cities of the world?

The temptation to chase after toys for *Trost* attracts not only children. Adults have their houses and cottages, cars and boats, stereos and TVs—the list of substitutes is endless. Human imagination continually dreams up new toys. But there is no substitute for the only comfort—the one comfort for all of life that comes through Jesus Christ. The main streets in every church city throughout the world offer the choice—the only *Trost* or the *Trost* of toys!