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This is a rare work of beauty and blessing.”

**EUGENE PETERSON**

# **BODY & SOUL**

## **RECLAIMING THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM**

**M. CRAIG BARNES**

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**PAUL DETTERMAN, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR  
OF PRESBYTERIANS FOR RENEWAL**





**BODY & SOUL**



# RECLAIMING THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM

# BODY & SOUL



Grand Rapids, Michigan



Louisville, Kentucky

**M. CRAIG BARNES**

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*In memory of the Reverend John Whallon,  
my college pastor,  
who introduced me to the Reformed tradition.*

*I rejoice that you are a part of the communion of saints,  
because I still need your encouragement.*



# CONTENTS

Introduction .....	9
The Only Comfort (Q&A 1) .....	13
Our Misery and Our Mediator (Q&A 2-25).....	37
Our Thorough Salvation (Q&A 26-52).....	61
The Spirit and the Sacraments (Q&A 53-85) .....	85
The Grateful Life (Q&A 86-115) .....	107
Teach Us to Pray (Q&A 116-129) .....	139
The Heidelberg Catechism .....	163
Notes .....	237



# INTRODUCTION

I did not grow up with the Heidelberg Catechism. It was not until I college that I was introduced to Reformed theology by a local church pastor who was so steeped in this theological tradition that it seeped through every sermon and every conversation we had over coffee in his office. He was the first to introduce me to the catechism's question "What is your only comfort in life and in death?"

I was enthralled with the discoveries about God, the church, and myself that I made during all the cups of coffee the pastor and I downed while talking about Reformed theology. I learned that grace actually precedes faith, that we are providentially held in the hand of God, that our advocate Jesus Christ pleads our cause before his Father, and that the Holy Spirit adopts us into the Triune family of God. All of that was life-altering for me. And all of it came from a pastor who had whole sections of the Heidelberg so well memorized that he easily made it a third voice in our conversations.

The first voice in those conversations was always the Bible. The second was the community of faith manifested in a pastor

and a parishioner who came in search of truth. The third and cherished voice was this catechism, which never took the place of Scripture but was always present as an honored teacher of the Word of God. That continues to be my understanding of all the church's confessional statements. Through all three voices the Holy Spirit creates a sacred conversation that can reform the church and the people who serve Christ's mission.

Eventually, I knew I had to attend seminary. I wasn't sure then about becoming a pastor, but I was very sure that I wanted to devote my life to these amazing Reformed insights about the Christian faith.

Although I attended a Presbyterian seminary, at that time little mention was made of the Heidelberg Catechism. Perhaps this was appropriate because it was never meant to provide a graduate-level theological education. However, while my seminary equipped me well for ministry in so many ways, what I did not receive was training on how to use catechisms as that third voice that can show up in my work between the sacred text of the Bible and the voice of the contemporary context.

It was not until I was studying church history while working on my Ph.D. that I was able to return to those coffeetime conversations I had with my college pastor about the Heidelberg Catechism. I then gained even more respect for it as I discovered more about the dust and grit issues of the sixteenth-century congregations for whom the catechism was written as a pastoral response. It was also then that I learned it's impossible

to understand the Christian faith without the voice of a holy tradition that is always waiting to be our teacher in the faith.

That discovery was about thirty years ago. Since then I have become a pastor and a seminary professor. And over the years this catechism, which turns 450 years old in 2013, has remained by my side in pulpits, classrooms, committee meetings, and pastoral conversations. It is always the helpful and much-needed third voice of tradition that enters every sacred dialogue.

In recent years there has been a renewed interest in catechisms in general, and in the Heidelberg in particular. Perhaps that is because we are finally returning to our tradition to gain insights about contemporary life. And maybe it is also because we live in a day when people are searching for a conversation with someone who can offer a clear and tender presentation on what it means to believe that “I am not my own, but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.” In the midst of all of the anxieties of contemporary life, no insight could be more comforting.



## CHAPTER 1

# THE ONLY COMFORT

[HEIDELBERG CATECHISM Q&A 1]

**A** woman waits in her Grand Cherokee behind a long line of cars caught in construction traffic. She's headed home from her mother's funeral. Her two children sit in the backseat, lost in their electronic games.

Looking around the strangely quiet vehicle, she sees the muddy soccer cleats, discarded Subway wrapper, broken umbrella, and crumpled water bottle littering the floor. Crammed between her driver's seat and the center consul is the Vogue magazine she hasn't read. On the dashboard lie the headband she uses for Pilates and the parking ticket she received yesterday when she stopped at the dry cleaners to pick up her dress for the funeral. She smells the dog that isn't even in the car.

*Sliding her fingers through her hair, she leans against the car door and rehearses the eulogy she just gave. Then she wonders what her children will rise up to say at her own funeral.*

**A** young firefighter finishes his shift and returns to his apartment late in the evening. As always, he's exhausted. He flips through the mail, which includes a notice from the landlord that his rent is going up.

*Haunted by how empty the place feels, he runs through his typical responses. He could call the girl he met last Saturday night. Or maybe round up some buddies and go out. He probably should go to the gym for the workout he's postponed too long. Instead he grabs a beer from the fridge and flops in front of the large-screen TV that still isn't paid for. But he doesn't turn it on.*

*He lies down on the sofa and lets the loneliness wash over him. It's the most courageous thing he's done all day.*

**A** new widower stands before his wife's grave. He wanted to remain there yesterday, after the burial, but his children and friends insisted that he accompany them to the reception. Now he finally has the opportunity to be alone with her.

*He's amazed that the world still works so well. The sun came up as always. On his way to the cemetery stoplights changed colors, and he saw two boys riding their bikes over a homemade ramp. How can that be?*

*As he stares at the freshly tamped dirt, he remembers their plan. They were going to work hard and then retire to enjoy life*

*together. That was the deal. But she had a heart attack. And now he's alone.*

## **CONTEMPORARY ANXIETY**

I was sitting in the audience for my daughter's graduation from college. The speaker, a well-known politician, launched into the same rhetoric I'd heard at my own graduation. "Your life is in your hands," he said. "You are the master of your own fate. So dream your own dreams, set your goals high, reach for the stars, work hard, and you can be whatever you want to be." Once the clichés get rolling, they're hard to stop.

I doubt any of us are so out of touch with our limitations that we really believe we can be whatever we want to be. We can only be the persons we are—with unique gifts, histories, delightfulness, weaknesses, and besetting sins. Yet the commencement speeches about endless possibilities go down so easily. Just because they're fantasy doesn't mean they lack power.

On the contrary, the power of a fantasy is found in its obstinate refusal to acknowledge the reality we prefer to ignore. We want desperately to believe that with hard work anyone can get the life he or she wants.

This "make a life for yourself" rhetoric is not new. In the ancient myths the quest to get life to the right place drove men and women on heroic journeys through monstrous obstacles. Odysseus's struggle with creatures from the sea and sirens from the shore remains a metaphor for the human struggle against both external and internal forces. Only today we don't confront

monsters; we confront choices. Lots of them. Early in life we bask in the freedom of so many choices, but eventually we discover they can create epic levels of anxiety.

When we were children we learned to choose between good and bad actions. The good was rewarded and the bad punished. As we grew we connived to get on the choice team or into the most popular social group. Toward the end of high school we worked out strategies for choosing the best job or college possible. But we weren't just choosing a job or a school or a major. We were choosing a life. We were going to be business owners, electricians, doctors, lawyers, artists, or teachers. If after a couple of years that didn't appear as fulfilling as we'd imagined, we simply switched jobs or majors. The direction of our lives seemed so easy to set, but we could never be certain we had chosen well.

This notion of creating our lives through choices persists into adulthood. We are free to choose a job, a spouse, if and when we will have children, where we will live and how involved we'll be in that community. If we do not find our choices fulfilling, we simply make different choices. And if we don't like the new choices, we need only choose again, and again, driven by the illusion that we can eventually find our way into a life we enjoy. The world stands before us like an à la carte menu: "I'll take one high paying and amazingly fulfilling job, a great looking and empathetic spouse, several close friends, two children, a lovely home—no, not that one. The one over there." If we believe in God, we've reduced the Almighty

to a lunch lady who stands behind the counter and dishes up made-to-order lives. The great problem with this fantasy is that it forgets we are mere creatures. Somewhere along the way we begin to think of ourselves as our own creators.

I am both a seminary professor and a pastor of a local congregation. Over the years, in observing the lives of my students and parishioners, I have learned that our greatest danger lies not in making bad choices, but in believing those choices define our lives. Even a good choice can be disastrous if made under the impression that it will save us.

Of course, we all must make choices, hundreds of them every day—from what cereal we'll eat in the morning to how we'll respond to the overwhelming challenges that take us by surprise. God created us with the freedom to make these choices. But none of these choices create our lives. It's living under the illusion that they do—believing that our lives are only in our own hands—that leaves us constantly anxious and fearful.

Overworked mothers sit behind the steering wheel and wonder if their children will value the sacrifices that have been made for them. What would that even mean? The mommy car, littered with the wrappers of one more meal on the way to piano lessons, one more pair of soccer cleats for growing feet, inevitably reflects the messiness and uncertainty of the family's future.

Young adults who know how to achieve their vocational dreams are less clear about what to do with their loneliness at the end of the day. Even those recently married discover

it does little for the empty feeling that emerges when they're exhausted. No amount of success, friendships, electronic distractions, or alcohol can fully anesthetize this familiar, lonely fatigue. In time they learn that the most courageous thing they can do is simply face it.

Older spouses bury their mates and regret the choices they made along the way that prevented them from enjoying each other while they could. If only they knew thirty years ago what they know now, they would have chosen differently. But we are never given such omniscience. So we just do the best we can, which inevitably leaves us torn by regret when our best is not good enough to give us the love we want. And we live in fear of the day, beside a grave, when that becomes all too obvious.

How do we find comfort from such anxiety? Not by making more choices. Our choices lead us only to more doubt and insecurity. They haunt us with the persistent voice that says, "I've could have chosen differently." So we can only choose our way into lives that we'll eventually consider inadequate. That's a shaky foundation for building a life. We need another way.

## **IS RELIGION THE ANSWER?**

Since this is obviously a religious book, you're probably expecting me to demonstrate how my religion provides this better way. I'm on my way to something like that. But first it's necessary to pause and confess that religion has actually contributed to our anxiety.

In our postmodern society we can no longer ignore the reality that there is not one religion, but many. And each offers its unique way of making sense of life from a perspective centered on God. From the beginning of Christianity, apologists have provided rational arguments for why our way is superior to others. But today it's increasingly hard to use rational arguments to prove the superiority of a way of knowing a God who refuses to be confined by rationality. And even if you find the Christian way compelling, the next irresistible question is, Which Christian way? We simply have too many choices.

Most North American churches work hard to develop attractive worship services and programs. That's because, though they rarely admit it, they are competing with the other churches down the street. This does little to relieve anxiety. Instead, it makes people wonder if they're in the right church or whether it's time to move to that popular megachurch in town. We tend to view the abundance of churches as just more à la carte resources. We might choose to be part of one church on Sunday mornings because our family has long belonged, but we participate in another church's Tuesday-morning Bible study, send our children to yet a different church's youth group, or embark on still another church's mission trip to Guatemala. Again, we assume it's up to us to construct a rich life from amid the various resources.

As someone who spends an unforgivable amount of time hanging around churches, I can assure you that religion is not the way to build a fulfilling life. It will keep you busy, but that's

just one of its problems. Sometimes when I'm on an airplane and the person next to me discovers my vocation, he or she will launch into complaints about the church. I usually respond by saying, "You don't know the half of it."

Of course, the church is a flawed institution. It's made up of very flawed people. But that's why we're part of it in the first place. To expect any religion to be free of people who have needs and wounds is like going to a hospital and being offended to find sick people.

At its best, the Christian religion witnesses to the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6). It invites us to settle into a particularly flawed community of faith and allow it to point beyond itself to the God who created our lives and in Jesus Christ was literally dying to love us. Nothing less will suffice.

## **AN INHERITANCE OF FAITH**

Christianity weaves our stories into the much more compelling narrative of God's history of salvation. All week long we are dominated by the problems of our own lives. We're preoccupied with "my health, my kids, my job, and my financial worries." By the end of a week littered with our limitations, we should be ready to come to church and hear about someone who has a better story going than we do. This is what Christian worship offers at its best: the story of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and now us as well.

In Christian worship we make the bold claim that our lives didn't begin when we were born, graduated, got a job, married,

had children or grandchildren. Neither does a disease, divorce, or the death of someone we cannot bear to live without define our lives. According to the Bible our lives start with the words, “In the beginning, God created. . . .” The most decisive chapter of our lives is found in the first chapter of John, when the Word “who was with God and was God” became flesh and dwelled among us. And when we get to the last book of the Bible, we discover that all our life stories end wonderfully—with God wiping away our tears and banishing disease and death. Nothing we can do can change this glorious ending that God has already written for us.

That’s why it’s a mistake for churches to concentrate on making their worship services relevant to the agenda of the self-constructed life. True worship does not try to cram thousands of years of God’s providential work with humanity into individual hearts. Rather, it inserts us into God’s history. It catches us up in the great biblical drama of salvation that began long before us and will certainly outlive us.

So instead of constantly striving for what is popular and new, it’s appropriate for churches to fill worship services with lots of very old things like Scripture, hymns, and creeds. These things remind us that patriarchs, prophets, apostles, and martyrs have already faced everything that we could possibly face in this life—and they point us to the God in whom those saints trusted. When any of us faces the inevitable storms of life, “my little faith” just won’t do. We need the sturdy, deep-rooted faith

of that “great cloud of witnesses” (Heb. 12:1) who placed their trust in the God whose story now envelops our own.

Along the stairway in our home hang twenty large black-and-white photographs of our family’s ancestors. The photographs date back six generations to the Civil War. Behind each are stories of hard times, war, lost farms, a Great Depression, and loved ones who died too soon. But beneath each of those calamities is also a story of persevering faith. So we call this our “Communion of Saints” wall. As they run up and down the stairs, we want our children to be reminded that they have inherited a great faith. It flows through the veins of their souls. We know that life will not be any easier on the next generation than it was on the previous ones, and when our children encounter hard times we want them to remember that there is more to who they are than meets the eye. We want them to know that the story of their lives began long before they were born.

For similar reasons the church has long cherished its creeds, confessions, and catechisms. They hang on the walls of our souls as reminders that “my faith” finds its strength as a part of “our great faith.”

Creeds, such as the Apostles’ Creed or the Nicene Creed, are ancient statements of faith that define the broad ecumenical contours of the Christian faith, the critical beliefs all Christians hold in common. Creeds typically build on the insights of those written previously. And those insights are a vital part of the great faith that holds us today. For example, most churches are guided

by the Nicene Creed, which was written in the fourth century and makes clear claims about the divinity of Jesus Christ. All generations need this constant reminder that we have a divine Savior, but we didn't form this idea. It forms us.

Confessions are statements of faith that have emerged out of specific events or struggles through the church's history. Since the context in which we live out our faith keeps changing, confessions carefully express what is at the core of our faith. Catechisms were written with the specific intent of teaching the Christian faith to the young or to those just coming into it. Together our creeds, confessions, and catechisms build a bridge from the Bible to the particular context in which the church finds itself. We gratefully receive these precious documents—written by theologians and tested by synods and councils—as our great inheritance from those believers who have gone before us.

This inheritance belongs to us as a source of strength and encouragement, but in a more profound sense we belong to it as our source of identity.

When we stand in church and recite a creed or even a passage of the Bible, we're doing something that sounds so strange today. We're saying that someone else wrote our beliefs. But can you imagine how awful it would be if we all stood in church to recite our personal mission statements? That wouldn't do much for our anxious souls.

We recite the creeds and confessions as a way of proclaiming that we are part of a great faith that has formed our lives. And that is the way of the Christian religion.

## **HELP FROM THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY**

Zacharias Ursinus (1534 -1583) was a young theology professor. At twenty-eight years old, he had all the right pedigrees from the finest education available at the time.<sup>1</sup> He barely had his books on the shelves of his new office when the German political leader Frederick III summoned him to begin drafting a new theological confession. At first that sounds like a great career move, but it was actually a task filled with peril.

By the time Ursinus came along the passions of the early Protestant Reformation led by Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Ulrich Zwingli—who “protested” certain practices and teachings of the Roman Catholic Church of that time—had died down. Now the Protestants had fragmented into several theological camps who argued with each other as much as they did with the Catholics.

In this divided Protestant church, Zacharias Ursinus began his academic career. He’d been teaching for just over a year. If he wanted to remain on the prestigious faculty of the University of Heidelberg, he would have to make difficult choices about his loyalties—such was the political reality of the day for scholars. Ursinus had learned that the hard way. He’d been forced to leave his previous teaching position in his hometown of Breslau, Poland, after being caught on the losing side of

a raging theological debate. That experience taught him how easily religion can be reduced to just more competing choices for how to construct a life. But through his diligent studies with the leading diverse Protestant camps, he developed a conviction that all of them held important beliefs in common.

In 1559 Frederick III took over leadership of the province of the Palatinate, in the southern part of Germany. The Palatinate, which encompassed Heidelberg, was divided between strict Lutherans sympathetic to Martin Luther and those Lutherans who preferred the changes Philipp Melancthon had introduced to the churches. Still others were devoted to the Reformed teachings of John Calvin.

It had long been the assumption of rulers that the people could be held together only with common religious beliefs. (It would be centuries before framers of the U.S. Constitution would begin a “lively experiment” with a disestablished church not under state control.)<sup>2</sup> In Frederick’s day people believed that since religious loyalties were of ultimate value, their ruler needed to be able to define and harness these beliefs to keep the people unified and committed to a common purpose.

So Frederick inherited a great problem that created substantial anxiety for him and his people: How could they be held together with their conflicting religious loyalties? Would they be Reformed or Lutheran? And if Lutheran, then what type? If Frederick couldn’t resolve this debate, his realm was threatened not only by the disunity within, but by outside forces that sought to exploit it.

Frederick decided to take a huge risk. He called on the relatively inexperienced Zacharias Ursinus to lead a team of scholars and pastors to write a new confessional document, a catechism that would pull together the Lutheran and Reformed churches within his realm. Given his varied theological training, if anyone could understand the nuances between the churches, Ursinus was the man.

Ursinus was assisted in this task by Caspar Olevianus, a twenty-six-year-old pastor who was the son of a baker and who had a passion for reaching out to ordinary people. Olevianus had also been a professor at the University of Heidelberg, but he resigned his position in order to become the minister of a congregation in the city. (His resignation from the university created the opening taken by Ursinus.) Together this professor and pastor, along with a few other local pastors and scholars, began to fulfill Frederick's charge: to write a catechism for the people of the Palatinate. All of them shared a conviction that beneath their differences lay a common gospel of hope.

From the beginning it was clear that the Heidelberg Catechism was developed as a consensus document intended to relieve the anxiety of the people in the Palatinate.<sup>3</sup> Not only were they anxious about their religious divisions, but beneath those pressing concerns lay the more profound anxieties of all humans: What holds life together? How do we know God? What is expected of a life well lived? And what will relieve us of our anxieties?

The authors of the Heidelberg Catechism were not seeking to construct a new church or draft a new theology. Rather, they attempted to dig beneath the particular religious affirmations of the divided churches to find a common faith that provided deep comfort in the grace of God.

## **A HOLY CONVERSATION**

Unlike other confessional documents of the era, which begin with careful theological claims about the doctrine of God, the Heidelberg Catechism begins with the human predicament. Its genius is that, while offering a careful and systematic statement of the Christian faith, it speaks very personally and pastorally to the hearts of anxious people overwhelmed by choices. And that is why this beloved catechism continues to hold such power for contemporary Christians. We still struggle under the tyranny of choosing a life well lived.

The word *catechism* sounds strange and even off-putting. If we have any familiarity with catechisms at all, we tend to think of them as rote memorizations of religious questions and right answers. But that was never their intent. They were written to provide a conversation between the most pressing human anxieties and the biblical story handed down through the centuries. The point is not simply to recite the right answer, but to enter a holy conversation.

The Heidelberg Catechism draws us into a dialogue between our deepest questions and the responses of historic Christianity. It serves not only the church's teaching ministry

and its worship of God, but every person in search of relief from the anxieties of the self-constructed life. While teaching us a basic or what C.S. Lewis called a “mere” Christianity, it speaks directly to our deep concerns, addressing them simply, personally, and comfortingly.

## **MY ONLY COMFORT**

The first, and most profound, of the catechism’s questions is “What is your only comfort in life and in death?” With almost poetic beauty it sums up the entire catechism by placing us in the embrace of the triune God. Its reference to the boundaries of life and death asks not only how we handle the existential angst of our mortality, but how we deal with all our death-like experiences—such as when child grows up differently than we planned, a job comes to its end, we lose our health, or our dreams fall apart. These experiences mock our illusions of being in control of life. The catechism begins by echoing our confusion in the face of inevitable losses.

“What is your only comfort?” Notice that the catechism says “your,” not “our.” This is an intensely personal question—the first of many in the catechism. Every one of us must answer it. Every one of us must confront the reality that comfort will never come by our next choice.

When the catechism speaks of comfort, it’s not referring to a sentimental notion that tranquilizes us from life’s anxieties. It’s not telling us, “There, there now, Dear. It will all be okay.”

Rather, the word *comfort* implies a strengthening. (Its Latin root means literally “with strength.”) In the words of the Swiss theologian Karl Barth, the catechism shows us how to stand on our feet again.<sup>4</sup> It invites us out of hiding behind our coping devices and calls us to stand again as women and men capable of taking on life with all its volatility.

The comfort the gospel offers is more than consolation or empathy for our worries. It is redemptive. It restores us to our position as humans made in the image of God, crowned with dignity and honor.

In other words, the catechism asks, “What can get us back on our feet as people who are no longer cowed by the next looming loss, the emptiness that re-emerges when we’re tired and undefended, or the regret that accompanies most of our choices?” Simply put, “What can make us unafraid?”

## **I BELONG**

The response is startling. The comfort of the gospel is the discovery that our lives do not belong to us.

We were perhaps expecting the catechism to reassure us that God will give us the cosmic boost we need to reach the life of our dreams. Instead, we find that all along we’ve been striving for a goal we could never attain. It was never up to us to work hard enough to find a life we would want to keep. It was never up to us to hold loved ones close enough to ensure that we would never lose them and be left alone. Each of us can stand only on the affirmation “that I am not my own, but

belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.” Those powerful words begin the answer to the catechism’s opening question.

Several years ago the congregation I serve buried a beloved couple named Lyle and Sandy. Lyle died first, quite suddenly. A few days after the funeral, when I returned to their home to check on Sandy, she told me about a pair of Lyle’s pants she’d just picked up with the dry cleaning. They were his favorite gray slacks. Sandy said that when she saw them she sat on the bed, held them to her breast, and all the grief began to overwhelm her heart. She said she didn’t know what else to do, so she began to recite the words of the Apostles’ Creed, which she had learned as a child: “. . . I believe in the forgiveness of sin, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.” And she said, “I found what I needed.” There was no mystical experience, no voice beyond the grave, no light. This was better than that. It was two thousand years of faith holding its arms around her. That alone enabled her to get back on her feet.

The Heidelberg Catechism is less well known than the Apostles’ Creed, but it is part of that great tradition of faith that holds on to us and gives us comfort in life and in death. Like the Apostles’ Creed, it reminds us that the lives we know, and the loved ones who are so critical to those lives, belong to the God who never loses them.

When Sandy died a year later, I could affirm at her funeral that she was now with her beloved Lyle, who greeted her on heaven’s shores beside Jesus Christ. I could say that not just

because of what I believe or what she believed, but because of what we believe. We all lose dreams and cherished people, which could make life a continual experience in despair. But if we lean on the great two-thousand-year-old faith of the church, then life is a continual experience of the salvation of God, to whom we belong. In God's hands nothing, and no one, is ever lost. Our only comfort.

According to the early church father Athanasius, Scripture teaches that God created all things *ex nihilo*—"out of nothing." Therefore all things derive their existence from the Creator, even the dust of the ground that God used to create humanity. Apart from the Creator there is only nothingness, or non-being.<sup>5</sup> So when human beings base our identities on anything other than God—a job, being in love, accumulating wealth—it results only in returning to nothing.

When I was a young pastor, I assumed that my parishioners came to worship to struggle over the existential issues of life. But eventually I discovered that was not what was going on the pews. Mostly what we are thinking about before Sunday morning's call to worship is Athanasius's nothingness. We're wondering how much work we have to get done before Monday morning. We're thinking about the party last night. We're mulling over the hurtful thing someone said in the car on the way to church. And we're wondering what that woman two pews ahead of us was thinking when she bought that dress. We're not really worried about the choices we make that lead us far from our Creator. We're too anesthetized by our favorite

distractions for that. Yet some distorted remnant of the holy perseveres in our souls, beckoning us to return to the Source of our lives.

## **TO MY FAITHFUL SAVIOR**

Since we have all wandered into nothingness, God had to do more than throw down a few prescriptions from heaven for how we could find our way back to life. God entered our world and became one of us. That is at the core of the story of Jesus Christ. In Christ, God became human—one of us. This act of self-giving love begins to re-establish the bond between us and the Creator to whom we belong. The marvelous gift of the incarnation is that God comes to our side; God enters our life.

Because God is with us in the human struggle, we are no longer destined to fruitlessly rearrange the circumstances of our lives. We no longer depend on another move, another relationship, or another weight-loss program to rescue us from nothingness, from that persistent ache in the pit of our souls. We can flourish because in Jesus Christ the Creator came to us and restored our dignity as God's children.

We discover to our shame that none of our choices can return us to God and to our God-given identity. On our own we manage only to drag ourselves farther from God. So in Jesus Christ, God did for us what we cannot do for ourselves. He reconciled us to God. He redeemed us from the sins that separated us from God.

Jesus always knew he would be heading to the cross. As the catechism teaches, there he “fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood” (Q&A 1). This Savior who was dying to love us frees us from the “tyranny of the devil,” who wants to keep us as anxious captives to guilt.

Whatever one may think of the devil, we can all agree that some force seeks to pull us away from our Creator. Often the pull seems irresistible. But in Jesus Christ, we are no longer powerless to resist it. We have the power to say no. We are no longer compelled to keep choosing things that lead us only deeper into nothingness. We found ourselves in Dante’s dark wood because we were not paying attention to the sleepy choices we were making along the path of life.<sup>6</sup> Now we have awakened to the discovery that we have always belonged to a faithful Savior who claims us, both body and soul.

Body and soul. The catechism beckons us to realize that all of life is under the liberating redemption of Jesus Christ. We are free from the despairing notion that our bodies and souls are disconnected. We have long been tempted to think that God may have our souls, but this bodily life is our own responsibility. This makes us suppose that the only point of religion is to take care of our anxieties about what happens after death. In the meantime we are left on our own to do the best we can with our fleeting years on earth. But the work of God in Jesus Christ is so much more than punching our ticket to heaven.

When I realize that I already belong to a “faithful Savior, Jesus Christ,” I make the marvelous discovery that he is always

at work in all things for “my salvation” in the life I have today. Again, notice that the catechism does not say “our” salvation. Of course, the “our” is implied. But the catechism’s authors want us to realize that salvation is not a group plan. It makes its way into every individual’s life.

Over the past several decades there has been a lot of helpful, prophetic writing about the dangers of our contemporary hyper-individualism. These days we are tempted to think that “it’s all about me”—one more reason we keep thinking of the world around us as nothing but resources for the self-construction of our lives. So it’s striking that the authors of this sixteenth-century document use the first-person singular. In their day there was no preoccupation with choices. At that time whole nations would convert to the religion of the prince of their state. But clearly, Ursinus and his colleagues wanted to stress the theological reality that has long existed: if you want to make a choice, choose to believe that your own life has always belonged to a Savior.

Your Savior is at work. As Q&A 1 of the catechism teaches, “not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven.” This doesn’t mean that God is the one who is plucking the hairs off our scalps or who is responsible for our profound losses in life. It means that God carefully watches over us. But as if that is not comfort enough, the catechism goes on to claim (based on Rom. 8:28) that because God is involved, “all things must work together for my salvation.” Nothing is beyond our Savior’s capacity to turn evil into good.

These phrases do not mean that everything works out just as we had hoped in this life. Sometimes our loved ones die despite our fervent prayers for their healing. Sometimes we don't get the job we asked God to give us. And sometimes what we were most afraid of happening does happen. What the catechism—and the whole of Christian tradition—means by the claim that “all things must work together for my salvation ” is that in all things, both wonderful and horrific, the Holy Spirit is at work, drawing us to Jesus Christ, the Savior to whom we belong.

When a small child skins a knee, he or she runs to a parent. On the parent's lap, the child receives comfort in an embrace of love. Before long the child is no longer thinking about the knee. Love has cast out anxiety. But the comforted child doesn't stay on the parent's lap. We know the child is truly comforted when, strengthened by love, he or she jumps off, ready to embark on the next adventure.

Jesus Christ gets us back into the lap of our heavenly Father and, consequently, back on our feet as people confident in the knowledge of who and whose we are.

After his death and resurrection, our Savior ascended into heaven to sit at the right hand of his Father. But Jesus' work is not done. He continues to unfold his salvation in our lives through the Holy Spirit. This is what Q&A 1 means by stating that “Christ, by his Holy Spirit, assures me of eternal life.” The Spirit offers this assurance by working through all things to bind us to Jesus. As we get glimpses of this, it overhauls our

perspective of life. More and more we begin to see our lives revolve around God and what God is doing. We begin to escape the claustrophobic confines of our little world. As the catechism puts it, the Spirit “makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for [Christ].”

Thus we find comfort for our weary and often anxious souls not by eventually choosing our way into the life of our dreams and not by celestial protection from skinned knees and broken hearts. Nor does our comfort come from a theology about Jesus Christ. We find our comfort *in* Jesus Christ.

The catechism teaches each of us to claim that my only comfort is “that I am not my own, but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.” It is Jesus who brings us back into the embracing arms of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The great tradition of Christianity has always confessed this as the only comfort that can get us back on our feet today and give us hope for tomorrow and all eternity.

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