

“United in Gratitude: The Heidelberg Catechism”  
Romans 7:14-25; Revelation 3:14-22;  
Mark 2:15-27; Romans

July 1, 2018  
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I'm doing a series on the Confessions as we go through the summer. In the Presbyterian Church's Book of Confessions, we call some things "Creeds," some things "Confessions," and some things "Catechisms." I thought I would take a moment to clarify that. A creed tends to be a short statement of belief. The confession, then, tends to expand on that, to try to explain the belief a little bit further. The Catechism really does the same thing, but it is in the form of a question and answer, so that you have questions that you go through as more of a learning tool, whereas a confession is more of a statement with explanations. Today we are going to talk about the Heidelberg Catechism, so I thought I would note these three different forms of statements of belief.

What I have been trying to do as we think about these different elements of the Book of Confessions (and today, the Heidelberg Catechism) is to think about the nature of what was happening at the time it was written. The Heidelberg Catechism was written in about 1563-64. What was happening was similar to what was happening in Scotland except that it was in continental Europe, so there was a slightly different flavor to what was happening.

There, the Holy Roman Empire was in charge, and it was made up of bunches of electorates, places that were ruled by people who then got to elect the Holy Roman Emperor. It would have been going for almost 700 years in various forms. In the 1500s it was beginning to change because of the Reformation. As that change occurred, the emperors were trying to hold it all together.

So what they had done at the Diet of Augsburg, was make an agreement that said that if the ruler of a local area, the elector, was Lutheran, then everybody else in that area could be Lutheran, otherwise they had to be Catholic. So it was a time where they were trying to figure out different ways of belief.

Into this comes an elector called Frederick III in a place called Palatine, which is in south-eastern Germany, near France. Frederick was the Palatine Elector, and he married a woman who was a high Lutheran. In the process, he began to try to understand what his faith was all about. In fact, he had a conversion experience to faith as he came to be the ruler of that region. In doing so, he ran into all this conflict.

He had a church in Heidelberg where the preacher was high Lutheran and the associate was Zwinglian. I'm not going to try to explain it all, but they had different views on the sacraments. One day during the Lord's Supper, the associate pastor was holding the cup and the senior pastor came and ripped it out of his hands. It caused quite a stir. So both of them were sent packing. But because of that, and because Frederick was getting a little upset with the zealotry of the high Lutherans, he wanted to understand his faith better. Through debate and his own study, and the time he spent reading the Bible and praying, he decided to bring some new people in to replace those who had left. One would take over Heidelberg University and the other would take over the main church in town. He had them write this new catechism.

In the process, he was becoming more reformed, more in tune with the Calvinist kind of thinking, so the people he brought in reflected his perspective. So this Heidelberg Catechism was written, and some of the folks who had a different view of the sacraments weren't real happy with what he had in his catechism. So it set up a conflict.

Maximillian II was the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire at the time. He began to see this conflict coming, so he called Frederick to come to the gathering of the electorate to defend himself. Jack Rogers has a nice description of this in his book on the confessions. Frederick comes and has no support from anybody who is there. But he comes and presents his case simply, sincerely, and very Biblically. He doesn't depend on Calvin or any of those other folks. He tries to simply use scripture and describe why they have come up with this particular catechism. He changes the tide. He was there to be tried on heresy, and he leaves being accepted and allowed to use the catechism. He gets a new moniker from the Emperor: Frederick the Pious.

So that's where this particular catechism comes from. It's in the midst of all this challenge and change, and trying to understand what faith is about and really entering into scripture again.

The fellow who was in charge of the university was named Zacharias Ursinus. He's the one who basically wrote the catechism. Some of the other people at the university and maybe the new pastor at the church were helpful. They structured it around 129 questions, and they broke those 129 questions into 52 groups. Why 52 groups? So that every Sunday night you could come to church and learn, over the course of the year, the whole catechism. We could spend the whole year going through this catechism.

I'm not going to try to enter into all the intricacies of this particular catechism. It's in many ways reflective of the conversation that was going on in that period of time, and the experience they were having. What it did was use the Apostles' Creed, the sacraments, the Ten Commandments, and the Lord's Prayer as the backbone of what it was going to describe. It was arranged into three major parts. The first section was on human misery; the second was on redemption; and the third on gratitude. What I would like to do is think about how this particular confession reminds us of those three things.

If we remember sin, the word "sin" in the New Testament means missing the mark. That's the starting point of this confession, reflecting on how we are missing the mark and we live in misery because of it. When I was on sabbatical, I heard a particular story that made me think about missing the mark. It goes like this:

There was this fellow who was an excellent archer, but he was frustrated. You know the story of Robin Hood where he split the arrow with another arrow? That's the kind of accuracy he wanted to have. He wanted to be able to hit that middle mark every time he shot, every time he pulled the bow. So he went to everybody he knew who could help him, and they each taught him a little bit, but he could never get it to be exactly the same. It felt like he could never hit the mark the way he was supposed to as an excellent archer.

So one day he decided to leave the region he was in and search for somebody who could help him find a way to truly hit the mark. One day he was walking through the woods and he saw the side of a barn, and on it there was an arrow here and an arrow there, and each one was dead center on. He said, "Wow! I think I've found the answer." So he went over to check it out. A little boy comes along, and the man asks, "Do you know who did that?" The little boy said, "Oh, yeah. I did it." He looks at the boy and said, "How do you do that?" "Oh do you want to see?" The boy pulls the bow, shoots, hits the side of the barn, then goes up and draws target circles around the arrow.

Now we can take that in a couple of different ways. Sometimes we need to recognize that perhaps what we're trying to do might not work and we may need to try something different. But the way I'm thinking about it is how easy it is to say, "This is the trajectory of my life so it must be right. I'll just draw the mark around what I'm doing and everything else must be wrong." But what if there is a true mark—a way to live, a way to be—and we can't hit that mark on our own as much as we try? I think that's what it's talking about.

Sin is that thing Paul is talking about when he says, "I try to do what is good, and all I do is the thing that is not what I want to do. I'm always missing the mark." Sometimes I think it's even hard to find the mark in our society today, to recognize what is true and good and right. It's hard to find that mark and hit it.

Finally, I believe, we have to find that we can't do it on our own, otherwise we're left in the dark and we struggle and we try to see how we can become somebody by making others like us or think we're great. Or we just begin to think we're not good, and there is all kinds of struggle and fear because we can't see our way, we don't know the end point. Sometimes we can't even see the mark.

That's when the redemption comes, and that's the second piece of the Heidelberg Catechism—we have redemption. To be redeemed is to be bailed out, basically. To be brought out of the darkness into the light. I think my experience of that is recognizing that no matter what I do, it does not influence God's value and love and care for who I am. Jesus came, not because I'm a good person and so is going to help me be a better person. He came to me, he came to us, he came to the world because we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. We have all lived in that darkness. He came to us because God so loved the world he sent his son. He came to us to bring us into the light, to give us light. I think he gives it to us by helping us recognize, first, that it's not what we do, not a way of comparing ourselves to others. It's that we are loved and valued as children of God and that he wants to invite us to the table. He wants to invite us into life. So in knowing Christ, it's like the dawn, the time we begin to see the landscape ahead of us. We begin to see a way. But it's not a way to go because we think we're going to solve God's concern about us. God takes care of that concern by sending Jesus.

Jesus comes as grace. He comes to invite us out of our darkness by knowing we're loved and valued, and to take away those ways we deceive ourselves about who we are, the ways we've drawn a mark around something that's not really a mark.

This invites us into gratitude, and that's the third part of the Heidelberg Catechism. We are invited into gratitude because we know one who has come who loves us, who saves us, who leads us, who undergirds us, to whom we belong. We know one who gives us a place at the table where we really are somebody—we are God's child—and helps us recognize that everyone else is, too. It's not about a competition to be the best. It's a recognition of a grace given that invites us to live in gratitude.

The gratitude section is where he puts the Ten Commandments and the Lord's Prayer because trying to do what is good and right is not about trying to please God so that God will accept me. It's about recognizing God's grace for me, and wanting, then, to please God because of that love given, that grace shared, that hope opened up in my life which leads to real hope.

The problem I see is if I live in gratitude, it's a different kind of hope than the hope I often live with. Because the hope I generally live with is the hope that I can change the world, the hope that I can make others like me, the hope that somehow I can be good enough, the hope that I can... That's the point. It's not about what I can do. My hope can't be based on myself because I don't have the power. I don't have the ability. I don't have everything I need to create a hope. My hope is in Christ. My hope is in God who invites us into life, who will lead us into life.

There is a quote that Margaret Wheatley gives from Thomas Merton, a famed Christian mystic, as he counsels:

*Do not depend on the hope of results... You may have to face the fact that your work will be apparently worthless and even achieve no result at all, if not perhaps opposite to what you expect. As you get used to this idea, you start more and more to concentrate not on the result, but on the value, the rightness, the truth of the work itself... you gradually struggle less and less for an idea and more and more for specific people... In the end, it is the reality of personal relationship that saves everything.*

It feels like it's so easy to live with disappointment because my hope, my expectations are dashed, than to accept that it's not about what I can do, but that I can simply live in the love of God and, in gratitude, do the best I can to do what is good and right and true. We do our best out of gratitude to God and let God save the world. And what happens in the process is that we share with each other. We become good for one another, and it develops that ability to have relationships. It develops the ability to come to the table and be a people—a people of God invited by the one who serves us, Jesus Christ, who enables us to be his through grace, who guides us through the hope he gives us, who shares with us the way of life.

So as we think about the Heidelberg Catechism, I think one of its great gifts is the idea of gratitude, that we live out of gratitude, not out of hope that I'm going to achieve whatever. I live out of gratitude and do what is good and right. Whatever my gift is, I use it as best I can. I do whatever I can do to make relationships better, but I depend on the healing of the great physician who really enables righteousness because I can't do it on my own. So we come to the table remembering that it is he who invites us and he who will go with us, that his spirit will move us as we open to his knocking and allow our lives to be shaped by our loyalty to him. Amen.