

# Birthday Bash for the Heidelberg Catechism



Last week Saturday, January 19, the *Heidelberg Catechism* turned 450 years old – wow! To help celebrate the occasion, the Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary put together a conference – and my take-home from the Conference was that the *Heidelberg Catechism* is a much greater treasure than we realize. In this *Bit to Read* I want to share with you why I say that.

## Catechism and Preaching

Some 200 of us settled into the Ebenezer Church in Burlington on Friday morning, January 18, to take in the festivities. Dr Joel Beeke from Puritan Reformed Seminary in Grand Rapids was the first to talk up the treasure of the *Heidelberg Catechism*, and did so on the topic “Catechism and Preaching”. Dr Beeke reminded his hearers that Elector Frederick III, the man who commissioned the Catechism, wanted to help his subjects come to know the Savior. The material he desired should be useful not only for the children of his realm (in some form of Catechism class), but should be useful also for the preaching Sunday by Sunday. In the preface Frederick wrote for the release of the *Heidelberg Catechism* on that memorable 19 January, he encouraged preachers to read 1/9<sup>th</sup> of the Catechism each Sunday (so that the congregation would hear the entire Catechism every 9 weeks), advised the preacher to have the Catechism students recite the Answer to a given Question in unison in church each Sunday (they’d have to memorize it in the week prior, with the assistance of their parents), and instructed the preachers to preach from the Catechism in every PM service. Lofty aspirations he had for the Catechism!

In short order Petrus Dathenus translated the *Heidelberg Catechism* into Dutch, and the Dutch churches quickly fell in love with it. In 1586 the Synod of The Hague made it mandatory that the Catechism be preached in church every Sunday. The Arminians objected to such staunch teaching of solid Biblical doctrine, but the Synod of Dort in 1618/19 pulled out all stops to protect Catechism preaching. Consider these decisions of this Synod: if a preacher failed to preach from the Catechism, he was to be censured; even if attendance was poor (eg, only the preacher’s family!), the preacher was still to preach the Catechism as an illustration of how important proper doctrinal preaching was; synod would petition government to ensure that the people would (be able to) attend church twice each Sunday so as to get a full diet of solid Bible preaching and teaching.

With the passage of years, the churches slowly fell asleep and the faith was steadily pushed further away from the grunt of real life. As a result, the value of Catechism preaching was questioned, the sermons detached doctrine from real life, attendance dried up, etc. But in the churches spawned by the Secession of 1834 Catechism preaching revived – and the same thing happened amongst the churches spawned by the Doleantie of 1886. This

remains our heritage today, where North America's small reformed federations (be it Canadian Reformed, Heritage Reformed, United Reformed, Free Reformed, etc) continue to treasure Catechism preaching Sunday by Sunday. As a result, the members of these churches have a doctrinal knowledge and a resulting Biblical worldview and lifestyle that makes these churches stronger within and without than the more mainline churches of our continent who have discontinued the practice of Catechism preaching.

### The Covenant in the Catechism

After a delicious lunch sprinkled with copious opportunity to touch base with other conference participants, the second speaker of the day put us to work considering the doctrine of the Covenant in the *Heidelberg Catechism*. Dr Lyle Bierma from Calvin Seminary in Grand Rapids did an excellent job in outlining just how fundamental a role God's gracious bond of love with sinners plays in the Catechism. He informed us that the term 'covenant' appears in only two Lord's Days (27 & 31), but the concept of the covenant in fact appears in dozens of Lord's Days. Zachariah Ursinus, one of the Catechism's authors, actually wrote two other Catechisms at around the same time as he penned the Heidelberger – and in one of those two (his *Larger Catechism*) he made numerous direct references to the covenant. In fact, many Questions and Answers from this *Larger Catechism* use identical terminology and phrases as parallel Questions & Answers in the *Heidelberg Catechism*, except that the actual word 'covenant' has been removed. The point is that Ursinus was very much *thinking within the framework of God's gracious bond of love with sinners* when he wrote Lord's Day after Lord's Day. As we today seek to understand the depths of the *Heidelberg Catechism*, we do well to think the thoughts of the author – and that means that we're needing to think in distinctly covenantal terms: God is *our* God, we are *His* people. <sup>1</sup>

The implications resulting from this insight are stark. Consider the following:

1. God's covenant is not made with isolated individuals, but with families. Frederick's intent with the Catechism was not simply to teach individuals the truth of Scripture, but to give parents a tool they could use to instruct their children about their identity. The *little ones* should be taught to think in terms of belonging with body and soul to Jesus Christ; they're not to see themselves in their growing years as outside God's interest and care, but to see themselves as deeply loved. So *children* (yes, long before they are teenagers) should memorize the Catechism, should be able to say with Lord's Day 1 that "I belong ... to Jesus Christ", and to say with Lord's Day 21 that "I am and forever shall remain a living member of" the church – for God loves *me*.
2. But that reality has consequences also for how one teaches the Catechism. The Catechism is never dry doctrine, never just interesting truths, but always God's promises to *you*, very personally. That gives color and life to catechetical instruction, not just in the minister's catechism class but also –and especially– in the parents' catechetical instruction. And it's parents first of all who stand beside their children in life's ups and downs, and so have opportunity to keep directing them to God's claim upon them and the resulting double benefit of redemption and the Holy Spirit promised to each little one. How rich when parents can keep quoting the Catechism to their children, and when the child learns to think and speak the language of faith.

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<sup>1</sup> No one knows why Ursinus did not mention the term 'covenant' so often in the Heidelberger. Perhaps it was because the term 'covenant' was seen to be too theologically loaded with baggage connected with a particular reformer, so that the *Heidelberg Catechism* would be connected to that reformer instead of simply to Scripture.

## The Secret of the Catechism's Success

After a supper recess a greatly enhanced crowd now filled the auditorium. The proceedings of the evening were livestreamed to participants in six other locations across Canada and the United States; three cheers for God's gift of technology. Dr Herman Selderhuis of the Theological Seminary in Apeldoorn, The Netherlands, addressed us on the Secret of the Catechism's Success. He told us that shortly after the Heidelberg Catechism's initial appearing, the fear was expressed by opponents of the Reformation that *this* Catechism would have a profound influence, greater than any other. That fear was vindicated; the *Heidelberg Catechism* has had a greater impact on more people and in more cultures and countries around the globe than any other confessional document. Why might that have been?

Dr Selderhuis informed us that the *Heidelberg Catechism* was immensely popular from the start, going through various printings in short order and in several languages. Once an item is on a wave of popularity, of course, its effect grows exponentially. People who were persecuted for the reformed faith took the Catechism with them to new contexts – and kept talking about it. The Catechism was printed in a Church Book, together with the psalms and the prayers – and so ended up in countless copies and in countless homes, and faithfully used. Businessmen took it along on their travels, and migrants to overseas colonies treasured it.

Yet none of the above could have happened had there not been something specific about its content that so excited its readers. Anna-Marie vanSchoorman, the first female student at the University of Utrecht in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, related that as a four-year old she memorized Lord's Day 1, and was so touched by its content that she never forgot for the rest of her life her special identity as a child of God; "I belong!" This was Frederick's purpose: to touch the hearts of his people so that in the joys and pains of daily life they always thought in terms of their relation to God. That is what the constant use of the first person pronouns (be it the singular 'I' or the plural 'we') repeatedly drives home. The *Heidelberg Catechism* was so popular because it expressed personal answers to one's real questions: "I belong, with body and soul, both in life and in death, to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ" – and subsequent Lord's Days kept working out why that reality is so and how that reality helps in daily living.

## Workshops

The resulting workshops on Saturday morning were again very invigorating. A number of Young People, encouraged by ROOTS, had come along Friday evening already and returned Saturday morning to participate in the discussions. It was very encouraging to hear how these Young People spoke of what the Catechism meant to them – specifically how their appreciation for the Catechism grew the longer they stayed in the school of life.

## The Comforted 'I'

The final speech took the cake, in my opinion. Dr vanVliet from the Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary in Hamilton hooked in on the fact that some Lord's Days use the singular 'I' while others use the plural 'we' (and none the third person 'they'). By drawing attention to which Lord's Days had the 'I' instead of the 'we', Dr vanVliet demonstrated that the use of the 'I' in particular Lord's Days is not accidental but deliberate – with the authors wanting the readers to express their *own* faith in the struggles of real life. This use of the singular 'I' doesn't make the confessor postmodern in his emphasis on *self*; on the contrary, this usage takes the emphasis *off* the self and places it firmly on Jesus Christ. Consider Lord's Day 1: "I am *not my own*, but belong ... to Jesus Christ." The formulation is distinctly "anti-ego"! In life's challenges and hurts, one's comfort lies in getting one's eyes off oneself fixing one's gaze distinctly on Jesus Christ – and as soon as one loses sight of Christ one

looses one's comfort. Hence 'I' need to confess my personal bankruptcy (Lord's Day 2: "I am inclined by nature to hate God and my neighbor"), and may yet confess (Lord's Day 7) that "I accept as true all that God has revealed to us in his Word" – and that's of course the gospel of Lord's Day 1. Then Jesus told us to pray using the plural form "our Father", and in its explanation of the Lord's Prayer the *Heidelberg Catechism* zealously uses the plural 'we' and 'us' and 'our' – until with the word "Amen" (the last Question & Answer!) it wants the confessor to get so personal again: "God has much more certainly heard *my* prayer than *I* feel in *my* heart that *I* desire this of him" (Lord's Day 52.129). At strategic points and on sensitive issues the Heidelberger would have God's people-by-covenant express their very *personal* and *heartfelt* convictions.

And so we're back to why this Catechism had such a profound effect on so many over so many years. Faith is never a dead and dry thing detached from the true Christian, nor is faith ever something that belongs to the vague and general 'we'. Instead, God's promises are always for specific persons and so biblical faith is always *that's person's* response to those *personal* promises. Of course, those promises are not limited to one person alone, and so there is opportunity and need to respond *together* to those promises – as one does with the plural 'we' and 'us' and 'our'. But the strength of the plural 'we' and 'us' and 'our' lies in the wealth of the singular 'I' and 'me' and 'my', wherein I respond to God's glorious claim of love laid upon *me* – so that *I*, in the grunt of daily life may know that *I, of all people, actually belong to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ*. That personable flavor of the Heidelberger makes this confession so delightful!

### Take home

All of this means, in my judgment, that I as a Catechism teacher and preacher, and indeed as a father in my home, need to make it my business to insist the more that congregation and children are not to see *the faith* as detached from *self*, but are to see instead that God's promises in Scripture are *for you* – and that is why *you* need to respond not just with intellectual knowledge about what the faith is but need to respond with heart-felt assurance that God's promises are actually "mine"; "***I –fill in own name*** – belong with body and soul, both in life and death, to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ."

### One more thing

I need yet to add that during the Conference a new website was 'unveiled' in relation to the *Heidelberg Catechism*. Can I strongly recommend that you go to [www.heidelberg-catechism.com](http://www.heidelberg-catechism.com), and snoop around there a while. This is an excellent, excellent resource for parents to (help) teach the Catechism to their children, for elders who need to read a Catechism sermon in the congregation, for ministers who need to research a Lord's Day with a view to sermon preparation, etc. It remains a work in progress, but given what's already there one may be assured that this is a site that will greatly assist God's people around the globe – and so help the *Heidelberg Catechism* be more successful still.

### And finally....

I enjoyed this Conference enormously. The Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary has done the churches a distinct service in organizing this conference; indeed, I would venture to say that through the Conference the CRTS has elevated its profile across the country and the continent. Thank you, Dr vanVliet and your team, for the work done on this conference – and for generating that website. I look forward to the next Conference next January!

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