

The Heidelberg Catechism – A Framework for Deeper Conversations

The Heidelberg Catechism can speak to the contemporary world in a powerful way, particularly if its vocabulary, rooted in the culture of the sixteenth century, is translated into a more accessible idiom. In many sectors of our culture, people are more open than they had been during the heyday of modernity to being nourished by the wisdom of the church's confessional heritage. The confessional documents of Christian traditions can be taken more seriously in an era that has become disillusioned with the pretensions of science and allegedly universal human rationality. The grounds for faith in the Divine, quite simply, cannot be rationally demonstrated. An instrument cannot measure God. The sacred cannot be bottled. We cannot take samples of a holy, transcendent reality and place them under a microscope. In our empirical reasoning, we need constants and repeatable results in different experimental situations, and these factors are not applicable to matters of faith.

However, even in the seemingly rational and objective world of scientific research, conundrums appear, such as those generated when quantum physics interacts with Newtonian physics. For example, in order to deal with the inability to measure both the location and the motion of a particle, scientists developed the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle, stating that “one (often, but not always) cannot know all things about a particle (as it is defined by its wave function) at the same time.” (Woods, Baumgartner, web). If our most sophisticated scientists are willing to consider that some phenomena cannot be precisely explained and quantified, then why cannot theologians, who are dealing with the vagaries of human experience and religious traditions over thousands of years, be

accorded the same latitude? God, most Christians affirm, is infinite, but our world is finite, and yet we all too often try to insist on a theological methodology that even physicists do not always adhere to with an iron grip.

Instead of modeling theology on scientific procedures, and producing systems of doctrinal propositions arranged according to logical inferences and entailments, all supported by alleged proofs, we can turn to the insights embedded in the liturgies, creeds, and catechisms of our mothers and fathers in the faith. However, this spiritual maturation cannot be achieved by simply reproducing their specific words. We must create a vocabulary to describe our very unsystematic and often paradoxical experiences and core convictions in a manner that can be communicated to others. Telling a person to simply “get into the Word” or to memorize doctrinal formulae does not effectively communicate the joy and challenge of reading the Bible devotionally, nor does it explain why, in a consumeristic world where multi-tasking is the norm, a person might benefit from such a counter-cultural task. As an example of the various ways one might read the Bible devotionally, yet with the same goal, I refer the reader to Dr. Greg Carey’s blog article, “Being Evangelical” (Carey, web). In this article, Dr. Carey defines devotional reading for a specific segment of the Christian population, and even within that segment points out that there are differences between those who read with a scholar’s lens and those who are “naïve biblicists” (Carey, web).

Moving beyond both the rationalistic reduction of Christianity and the mechanical repetition of literal biblical or doctrinal language will require us to become ever more creative in our use of language, especially if we hope to keep engaging youth. If we limit ourselves to specific language structures, we will be outdated before we even start to

speak. By using continually changing metaphors that remain flexible, without diluting meaning, our message has a chance to be heard amid the 140-character Tweets that have become the limit of our attention. We need to learn to utilize this linguistic structure in an engaging manner so that we stay, #relevant.

The modern "seeker-sensitive" movement has brought people to church, but its continued use of coded "Christianese" language creates barriers for those who do not speak it, and does not provide a rich enough vocabulary to express continuing Christian growth. For example, the oft used phrase in youth ministry, *love on*, carries with it negative secular overtones. This phrase also limits growth because it is something Christians are to do to someone, with or without their permission, usually when the person's behavior is not in line with accepted church behavior. Rather than encouraging conversation about the situation, it imposes a behavioral standard.

To address this problem, a turn to the riches of our devotional heritage can be fruitful and rewarding. Our ancestors in the Reformed faith struggled to make the language of the Bible intelligible to their own culture. They sought to preserve the underlying theological dynamics of the biblical message while articulating it in a vocabulary that was intelligible to their culture. The Heidelberg Catechism provides a linguistic framework, structured around the foundational themes of guilt, grace, and gratitude, which can foster deeper discussions on the human condition, God's grace, and our new life. At the same time, it encourages long-time Christians to continue to stretch themselves out of their comfort zones, forcing an outward focus to discern where God is speaking in a rapidly changing world. One of the largest seeker-sensitive churches,

Willow Creek, discovered this in its own self-study, *Reveal: Where Are You?* (Branough, web).

The essentials of our human condition have not changed since the Biblical canon was closed, or since the Heidelberg Catechism was written. The poetry of the King James Bible's English may no longer sing in our souls, yet we can still understand David's cry of lament at injustice in Psalm 109:

¹Do not keep silent,
O God of my praise!
²For the mouth of the wicked and the mouth of the deceitful
Have opened against me;
They have spoken against me with a lying tongue.
³They have also surrounded me with words of hatred,
And fought against me without a cause.
⁴In return for my love they are my accusers,
But I *give myself to prayer*.
⁵Thus they have rewarded me evil for good,
And hatred for my love. (Psalm 109:1-5, NKJV)

And likely we hope for similar outcomes as David did against our enemies, as he continues in the psalm to ask God to provide violent retribution against the one who has falsely accused David:

⁶Set a wicked man over him,
And let an accuser stand at his right hand.
⁷When he is judged, let him be found guilty,
And let his prayer become sin.
⁸Let his days be few,
And let another take his office.
⁹Let his children be fatherless,
And his wife a widow.
¹⁰Let his children continually be vagabonds, and beg;
Let them seek *their bread* also from their desolate places.
¹¹Let the creditor seize all that he has,
And let strangers plunder his labor.
¹²Let there be none to extend mercy to him,
Nor let there be any to favor his fatherless children.

¹³ Let his posterity be cut off,
And in the generation following let their name be blotted out.
(Psalm 109:1-5, NKJV)

Our feelings are likely the same, but Christ provided a new message for the new possibilities for spiritual growth that had become available in the culture during the time of the New Testament, a message that calls us to turn the other cheek and love our enemies (Matthew 5:39, 43-46). Our task today is to translate Christ's message into one that still addresses our feelings, without subjecting ourselves to abuse. Rather than a simplistic belief that we cannot, as Christians, experience anger at the evil that befalls us in the world, we need to learn to channel our feelings towards seeking justice, not retributive revenge.

In reading various materials, ranging from different books of the Bible to creedal statements, finding those essentials of humanity becomes difficult as we encounter shifting vocabulary. In both the Psalm and in the text from Matthew 5, the concern is the same – responding to being injured. But the expressive style and the vocabulary have changed. After the brief poetry of the Beatitudes, Jesus changes to a more direct discourse suited for the crowd that he is addressing. He provides examples suited to his audience, using objects that they are familiar with using (lamps) and items of value (salt). Specific to verses 39 and 43-46, Jesus uses items (cloak and tunic) that people are likely wearing at the moment, and the weather, a daily concern of farmers, to illustrate his points. These examples show how new metaphors and images can open up new vistas within a tradition, and foster a sense of the relevance of the evolving tradition. The

perennial issues that trouble human beings, and the main themes of the Old Testament, were reframed and reconceptualized by the New Testament's use of new metaphors.

Preserving the underlying thematic structure of the biblical and doctrinal statements, while substituting more modern more modern language, can generate broader understanding. For example, Jesus is described as the Messiah (in a Jewish idiom), who is described as Jesus the Logos (in a Greek idiom), who is then described as Jesus the Man-for-others (in a twentieth century idiom), and, potentially, may be described as Jesus the Ultimate Answer (in a post-modern idiom) (Lindbeck 80, 82).

The message of “guilt, grace, and gratitude” can address the ultimate questions and struggles resident in the human condition. That basic thematic structure captures much of the significance of the biblical message. However, post-modern culture may look at the more specific vocabulary of the Heidelberg Catechism, including the language of sacrifice and retributive punishment, and miss the application of these themes to the enduring human condition of searching for relief from a sense of spiritual and moral failure, anxiety, despair, and brokenness (Barrett 25). The structure of sacrifice and atonement is no longer part of our moral universe. Penance, as a public and shameful punishment, has been abandoned in favor of reconciliation. We have moved from a desire for impersonal and legalistic punishment to personal and rehabilitative restoration of relationship.

In order to keep the contemporary reader from feeling distanced by the vocabulary of the Heidelberg Catechism, we need to communicate the underlying thematic structure first. The theologian George Lindbeck called this the depth grammar of the faith. If we replace these historically Christian words but retain the framework, the

three-fold sermonic message of the Heidelberg Catechism, sin, grace, and gratitude for new life, can be retained. Instead of diluting the message, it can become relevant for today by allowing the post-modern reader to find solace in something they cannot see, feel, or measure. Expressing the essential motifs of the Catechism in a more comprehensible cultural idiom can nurture a sense of blessedness that science simply cannot provide.

This is not to imply that we continually re-word the Heidelberg Catechism as frequently as we create new technologies. Rather, we can use the structure and flow of the catechism to move us from an appreciation of the deepest dynamics of our faith to holy conversations about how those dynamics can be expressed and articulated in contemporary cultures. By focusing on the framework, rather than on the specific words, we can move away from rote recitation of the right answer and into a dialogue with the biblical narrative (Barnes 27). In this dialogue, we have the opportunity to discern the difference between our faithful experiences and our more worldly experiences because we have a grammatical framework to interpret those experiences (Lindbeck 34).

There is resistance in today's culture to the rote memorization of catechism questions. Such a practice is antithetical to our culture's much prized individualism of personal conviction and experience. So, suspicious of the wisdom of the past because of the way that it is communicated, we are willing to turn to contemporary worldly solutions to our problems that exhort us to do something that is not terribly inconvenient to fix the issue, as long as we can retain our liberty of thought. We will take the right pill, find the right exercise, read the right book – whatever it is, once we find it, and do it in just the right way, and we then expect to find relief. Rather than turning to any kind of

confession, catechism, or older wisdom, we choose to throw away all that we deem old in favor of the newly marketed solution. However no worldly solution has yet worked. All of our outward attempts at fixing our inward problem do nothing more than create more frustration as we try to do “it” just right. It can be called sin/guilt or anxiety/depression, but however this condition is described, it results in a deep yearning inside of us for relief from the burden. Why? Because in the end, contemporary society is frustrated by the same human condition, and the same underlying issues, that have plagued humanity since the beginning of time. It is this condition which drives us to seek reconciliation today.

While we cling to our personal experiences and convictions, we neglect seeing that they are all addressed in the same framework that exists in various creeds and catechisms, including the Heidelberg Catechism. The sometimes inaccessible vocabulary of the past can blind us to the spiritual riches available in the historical roots of our faith. But if we stop to consider the full scope of Christian writing, we see that while words have changed over time, the structure of the message has remained constant. It is this ability to change that has allowed Christianity to survive, for without such change, any language loses its relevance and becomes obsolete (Lindbeck 84).

Without knowing the cultural context, it is difficult to relay the message in a meaningful manner (Lindbeck 92-93). In teaching the Heidelberg Catechism, we need to be aware of our context, and address our teaching appropriately. As an example, in Question One of the Heidelberg Catechism, we find that it is acceptable to stop all of this “doing” because we belong to Christ. I suggest that we explore what “belonging” means to various people. For the person raised Roman Catholic, one does not belong to a certain church, but instead to the larger Church, with loyalty to the larger institution, not

to the local church. For a person of color, with ancestors who arrived via the slave trade, “belonging” can mean something quite different. Is being owned by another a comforting idea? Or does it connote being owned as property? But if the desirability of being free from ownership is not part of person’s cultural legacy, then perhaps being owned by God is more comforting. As someone who grew up Roman Catholic, I find the idea of belonging to Christ comforting because there are no limits on the love of God, while the institutional church, a creation of humanity, has had failures in living out the Great Commandment. Perhaps for a former slave, a more positive metaphor of ownership is one of unconditional, *good* care, instead of conditional care based on another human being’s whims.

Debt is another area where the post-modern society’s vocabulary may clash with the Heidelberg Catechism. For the convicted embezzler, the concept of a debt being paid is likely very different than it had been before being caught. Time in prison may not be seen as debt repayment, but only as punishment for being caught breaking the law. A student graduating with large amounts of debt may see agreeing to serve humanity in a less desirable area as equivalent to repayment of debt, where a banker only sees the return of money with interest as true repayment. All of these meanings have such varied and slippery meanings based on their contexts, yet from each person’s perspective the specific meaning that she or he attaches to the words is appropriate. This is the point where the holy conversation begins. Through conversation, the appropriate vocabulary must be discovered that can do justice to the depth structure of the gospel message and also be positively meaningful to a particular individual or community.

Once we have discovered appropriate understandings for belonging to God, and the images and metaphors for expressing them, then we are able to gain comfort from the release of responsibility for doing “life” right, as if it were a task whose accomplishment is our own heroic achievement. By engaging in conversation with the Heidelberg Catechism and the accompanying scriptures, we build our fluency with the depth themes and structures of Christianity, and thus our ability to build our own vocabulary within the grammar of faith. This nurtures in us the ability to internalize the message of what it means to belong to God.

Encouraging the conversation starts by recognizing that it is the framework of the Heidelberg Catechism, not the specific vocabulary, that promotes and sustains the exploration of Christian meaning. By bracketing the 16th century vocabulary based in a legalistic culture of retributive justice, we open the door to contemporary society, and conversation with a range of theological worldviews, from liberation and social gospel theology to neo-orthodoxy and process theology. Most importantly, by opening up our language, we cease to judge those who do not understand one particular cultural context, thus removing a stumbling block to their understanding (Romans 14:7-13).

The depth grammar of Christianity as expressed in the Heidelberg Catechism has a perennial appeal and relevance. Humanity has always had a central problem – an inability to fully love God and others (Heidelberg Catechism, Q4, 5). In Question 4, we learn that we are to love neighbor as we love ourselves, yet in Question 5 we learn that we are unable to even love our own self perfectly. For the contemporary reader, this becomes the ultimate alternative to the self-help aisle of the bookstore. Rather than

seeking yet another book by another famous name, we need to turn to the most famous Name.

The grammar of the faith is expressed with power and beauty as the catechism develops, even though the catechism's specific images and concepts may be culturally relative or even archaic. As the catechism teaches, in spite of our disability, God continues to love us, and has joined us in solidarity through the person of Jesus Christ (Heidelberg Catechism, Q18, 56). God also understands that we need continual reminders of that solidarity, and has provided us with the sacraments to help us center our faith in the work of Christ (Heidelberg Catechism, Q66, 67, 68). Baptism provides us with a visible entrance into the covenant with God by ritually washing away the sins that have already been removed in spirit through the blood of Christ (Heidelberg Catechism, Q70, 72, 73). The Lord's Supper spiritually nourishes us who understand that though we are imperfect, God still claims us as members of God's covenantal family (Heidelberg Catechism, Q76, 77, 81).

The importance of the sacraments in the Catechism is by no means an inappropriate emphasis for our contemporary culture. Our need for rituals can be seen throughout the secular world, where graduations now take place from Kindergarten, not just high school, college and graduate school, and where every accomplishment is published instantly on Facebook. When asked why we participate in rituals in church, the secular world provides our answer. Why do we have rituals outside of church if they are meaningless? In some way, these ceremonies must have importance or we would have stopped doing them, just as men have stopped wearing powdered wigs and women have stopped wearing hoop skirts to formal events.

The Catechism assures us that in experiencing this covenant with Christ, we grow in love for God, others and self. This is not something that we achieve on our own by doing any specific act or claiming any creed, it is a result only of the grace that we receive by faith (Heidelberg Catechism, Q62, 63,64). However, this does not free us from the imperative to engage in compassionate, just behavior. In fact, as our love grows, our desire to demonstrate that love for the glory of God also grows (Heidelberg Catechism, Q86, 91). It is this desire to do good apart from our own benefit that distinguishes our behavior from self-righteousness. We are all familiar with politicians who pander to their constituents, when they have no intention of addressing the issues once they are in office. Good deeds done solely out of love are surely appreciated more than those done out of a need for positive news ratings, especially as they are more likely to be repeated.

By engaging contemporary culture in this kind of holy conversation using the depth themes embedded in historical materials like the Heidelberg Catechism, we can connect past, present, and future. Looking back we learn that we are not alone in wrestling with these enduring issues, and we can gain wisdom from those who have gone before us. We can then bring that knowledge into our present context by reshaping the words into a vocabulary that is currently understandable. Finally, we can understand that this vocabulary must remain flexible and somewhat fluid in order to remain relevant as the church moves into the future. By being aware of our context and by working person-to-person, we can create a space where wisdom has the nourishment it needs to flourish in individuals, instead of languishing in dusty library tomes.

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