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### The Reformed Theology of the *Heidelberg Catechism* for Today

Thanks to the *Heidelberg Catechism*, I am now able to affirm some of the doctrines that I had previously rejected. My fear that I could not simultaneously espouse a belief in a sovereign God as well as a loving God is dissipating. After reflecting upon this influential document, I am able to better articulate what I believe and why these beliefs resonate with me.

In *Rilke's Book of Hours: Love Poems to God*, Rainier Maria Rilke writes, "I want to utter you. I want to portray you not with lapis or gold, but with colors made of apple bark. There is no image I could invent that your presence would not eclipse" (121). As the *Heidelberg Catechism* suggests in its condemnation of idolatry (Q 94 and 97), God is much more than we can ever imagine. God is divine and we are merely human. God is infinite while we are finite creatures. Of course, we must use human images and human words to explain God the best that we can. The catechism itself abounds in metaphors for God, particularly parental ones. In order to believe, in order to trust, and in order to have faith in our God, we try to put what we believe into words—human words. I realize that all words are inadequate, but they are all that we have to express the mystery of God. The Reformed tradition appropriately takes the inadequacy of our language into account by affirming that our beliefs are continually evolving and reforming.

#### **God as Sovereign**

As I reflect on what I believed in the past, I admit that I had been willing to relinquish a belief in God's power in an attempt to magnify God's love. I have struggled with the issue of the relation of the power and love of God for many years. To stress God's omnipotence would seem

to make God responsible for a host of apparently unloving phenomena. Sometimes it takes someone else's thoughts or words to make something click, which is a service that the catechism has provided for me in regard to this issue. I have been pondering how God's power can actually be God's love. The *Heidelberg Catechism* is structured upon the twin themes that God is both sovereign and is loving. The catechism implies that God is sovereign precisely because God is love. It is significant that the theme of God's sovereign power operative in the world is usually introduced in the context of encouraging trust in God's parental concern for God's creatures (Q 26 and 27). The catechism explains that the "almighty and everywhere power of God...so governs [heaven and earth] that plants and grass, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, food and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, and all things, come to us not by chance but by God's fatherly hand" (Q 27). Consistently the catechism discusses God's providence in the context of God's benevolence rather than in the context of reflection about God's abstract metaphysical perfections. Influenced by the *Heidelberg Catechism*, Presbyterian theologian Daniel Migliore notes in *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, "The power and love of the triune God are inseparable" (Kindle Location 1868). In a similar way, the answers to the questions about God in the catechism assert that God's love has the power to create, to guide, to comfort, to love, to forgive, and to reconcile. God's love is power—God's love is more than we as humans are able to wrap our minds around. So, God is sovereign love. We can trust in a victoriously powerful God as well as a God of love. We believe "in a God who is free to be compassionate toward us, free to become vulnerable for our sake, without ceasing to be God" (Migliore Kindle Location 1864).

God's sovereignty offers hope, especially when bad things happen in life. As the *Heidelberg Catechism* states, "...we may be grateful in adversity, thankful in prosperity, and trust our faithful God and Father for the future, certain that no creature will separate us from

God's love..." (Q 28). The affirmation that God is ultimately in control and that God will be victorious is intended to relieve anxieties and fears. The catechism emphasizes the response of trust in God's sovereignty without speculating about the exact way in which God's power operates. The catechism leaves open the possibility that the God's power need not be imagined as overwhelming the agency of creatures, or as achieving its purposes through force. Migliore proposes, "God's omnipotent love is God's own, it does not work by domination or coercion but is sovereign and effective without displacing or bludgeoning God's creatures" (Kindle Location 1875). God's power is God's love in action. I admit I still struggle with the theodicy issue, particularly with the suggestion that misfortunes are sent by God, as Question 26 seems to intimate by alluding to "whatever evil God sends to me in this troubled life." Like many Christians, I cannot ascribe the occurrence of egregiously hurtful events to God. However, I am content knowing that God is sovereign and that God is love. Many mysteries remain but I am comfortable living with these mysteries, as the catechism is in its avoidance of metaphysical speculation. As Christians we are called to struggle, to wrestle, and to continually stretch and grown in our trust, our faith, and our understanding of God.

### **Revelation**

Who is God? Who am I? How do we, in our humanness, come to realize who we are in relationship to God, in relationship to this world and all of creation, in relationship to others? How do we know what to do, how to act, and how to be? These are age-old questions—questions which have been asked over and over again. They are questions that have been struggled with, wrestled with, answered and then explored and answered once again. How does God reveal God's self to us, to us human creatures? How do we know who God is in the context of our lives today?

According to most Reformed theology, the revelation of God comes to us in different ways. There are natural revelations which are innate in the structure of the universe—they come to us through nature, through creation, and through our ordinary human experience. We know who God is because we see the works of God all around us—the ocean, the mountains, the birds, the cycles of life, and the seasons. We know who God is because we feel connected to something larger than ourselves. We feel there is more, more than just ourselves. The tradition stemming from John Calvin usually called this “natural piety.” We are not the center of the universe; in fact we are quite insignificant in the grand scheme of creation. We know who God is because God is our Creator. As John Calvin concluded, “There is within the human mind and by natural instinct an awareness of divinity” (Migliore Kindle Location 823). Interestingly, the *Heidelberg Catechism* says little about this natural revelation of God, although it may be implied in the discussion of God’s activity in ordinary events.

But, because we are human and God is divine, we also need special revelation—times when God reveals God’s self in a more specific way, with more clarity and new insight. In the *Heidelberg Catechism* special revelation comes to us primarily through the birth, life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The answer to Question 19 asserts that the “holy gospel” was “finally fulfilled through God’s own well-beloved Son.” According to the catechism his gospel was “proclaimed by the patriarchs and prophets” and “foreshadowed through the sacrifices and other ceremonies of the law” (Q 19). Echoing the spirit of the *Heidelberg Catechism*, Donald K. McKim writes in *Introducing the Reformed Faith: Biblical Revelation, Christian Tradition, Contemporary Significance*, “In the Bible we meet a God who communicates with humans, who calls, speaks, and shows us who God is. God has been revealed to the world, and the Bible is our source for knowing God” (13). God has revealed

God's self through the covenants, the acts of grace, the love shared with all of creation—all of which are attested to in Scripture.

I affirm both the natural and the special revelations of God. When I am at the beach, I sense God's presence as I gaze at the vastness of the ocean or as I listen to the ebb and flow of the tides. I feel connected and comforted by something that is indeed larger than me. My problems fade away as I realize that there is more than merely this earthly life—there is so much more. I have a God, a Creator, who is my protector, my guide, my source of life. As the *Heidelberg Catechism* confesses, God is “the only source of all good” (Q 125). The cycles of nature also affirm the presence of God. Winter is a time of barrenness, a time when all is hidden. Yet winter gives way to spring, to that time of new life, rebirth, and new hope. And spring is followed by summer, a time when the crops continue to grow, when life is abundant, when the sun shines the strongest and brightest. Finally, there is fall, the time of harvest, the time when all that has been produced is reaped. The cycles continue, one after another, over and over again. God's handiwork is revealed through nature, through the never-ending cycles, through the orientation, the disorientation, and the re-orientation of life. All we need to do is pause, open our eyes, open our ears, and open our hearts.

Yet, we also need special revelation. The hermeneutic practice of the *Heidelberg Catechism* assumes that Scripture truly reveals the nature of God. As humans we may turn away from the presence of God in nature; the day-to-day occurrences and busyness of life, and our sinfulness, obscures this general revelation. The *Heidelberg Catechism* focuses on the Bible for the more special revelation of God's parental care. In the words of the catechism, we must be taught by “the living preaching of God's Word” (Q 98). We read in the pages of Scripture the many ways that God has revealed God's self to humans. We learn about the creation story, the covenant with the peoples of Israel, the flood and the promise of the rainbow—and these are just

a very few of the ways God's character is revealed through Scripture. McKim's words express the sentiment of the catechism when he suggests that through Scripture "God is portrayed as 'calling' to people, inviting them into relationships...God declares who God is and what God wants people to do by revealing the divine self to them" (14). Through Scripture we learn of a God who is always faithful, a God who is a keeper of promises, a God who is trustworthy, a God who is merciful and just. We learn this through the stories of the past—the way God interacted with our ancestors.

Although the United Church of Christ appropriately affirms that God is still speaking, the *Heidelberg Catechism* reminds us that the ultimate revelation of God has come to us in the form of Jesus Christ. It is crucially significant that in Question 1 God is defined in terms of Jesus Christ. The faithfulness of our savior Jesus Christ is the key to the understanding of the caring "will of my Father in heaven" and of the reassuring activity of the Holy Spirit (Q 1). As Christians we look to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ as the crucial revelation of the nature of God. In the catechism extravagantly interpersonal language is employed to describe God. By becoming human and walking on this very earth, God, in some sense, was able to experience all human emotions and feelings, for Jesus, the incarnate Second Person of the Trinity, suffered "inexpressible anguish, pains, and terrors" (Q 44). We have a God who understands what it means to be human. As Migliore writes, "Only revelation through a person can be fully intelligible to us, who are persons, and only personal revelation can adequately disclose the reality of God, who is supremely personal" (Kindle Location 909). It is through this unselfish act that God is revealed as the compassionate companion, the loving protector, and the forgiving guide. Through Jesus' actions and ministry, we have a path to follow. We were shown how to live in community, how to take care of each other, and how to take steps toward bring

God's shalom to our world. And, for the *Heidelberg Catechism*, this is the most divine revelation.

### **Providence**

I admit to struggling and wrestling with the doctrine of God's providence. My initial reaction had been to reject extreme views of the scope of God's providence. For me, such views seem to portray God as manipulative and appeared to negate responsible human agency. On the other hand, any view of divine non-intervention would portray God as strangely aloof. So, in dialogue with the catechism, I will begin with what I do not believe about God's providence.

The *Heidelberg Catechism* does not suggest a picture of God as the cosmic watchmaker—the God who sets creation in motion and then steps away. Question 26 aptly affirms that the eternal Father “sustains and governs [heaven and earth] by divine eternal council and providence.” However, I do not believe in God as one who manipulates or micro-manages human actions. Moreover, I do not believe that everything happens according to God's plan or for a reason which is known to God but not to us. I do believe in free will. I do believe in the laws of nature. So, in conversation with the *Heidelberg Catechism* I will try to piece together what I believe and do not believe as I attempt to reconcile my understanding of God with the doctrine of providence.

Echoing the sentiments of the *Heidelberg Catechism*, McKim writes that “The biblical materials have led Christian theologians to understand God's continuing involvement and care for the world as well as God's government of the world as the doctrine of providence” (47). I do believe God continues to care for the world. And, I also believe God governs some aspects of creation. So perhaps I need a fuller understanding of what providence means. McKim goes on to state, “God preserves the creation; God cooperates with all created beings; and God governs or guides all things toward the accomplishment of God's ultimate purpose” (47). This claim surely

captures the spirit of Question 26's affirmation of God's sustaining and governing activity. I can confess this in the sense that God is working with humanity, that God is guiding rather than forcing. And I affirm that God ultimately wants creation to be in harmony and in peace. I believe that God urges us toward good and when we make a bad choice, there are hurtful consequences. Still, I believe God then offers new possibilities and fresh options. The *Heidelberg Catechism* believes in the need for prayer and I also believe that "God will certainly hear our prayers for the sake of Christ our Lord" (Q 117). I believe in miracles as they are revealed in God's world and in Scripture. Still, I struggle with some of the ways that God's providence is explained and defined, particularly the suggestion that "sickness" and "poverty" are the products of God's will (Q 27). But, as I said before, I believe in a God who is still speaking ... a God who will continue to reveal God's nature in time. So all is well.

### **Predestination/Election/Salvation/Universal Salvation**

Admittedly, predestination and election are two additional terms I have struggled with and, in the past, rejected. Most particularly, double predestination, the notion that God deliberately chooses to exclude specific individuals from salvation, seems to be incompatible with an affirmation of the unlimited scope of God's compassion. In light of my doubt, I was surprised to discover that it may be easier to derive a belief in universal salvation from predestination than from free will. Of course, the *Heidelberg Catechism* explicitly rejects universal salvation, and restricts salvation to those who are grafted to Christ by true faith (Q 20). It does speak of a community of believers chosen for eternal life which is not coextensive with the human race (Q54). However, the catechism's belief in the unconditional nature of God's acceptance of sinners opens the door to the possibility that this compassion could be extended to everyone. The catechism asserts that we do not please God by the worthiness of our faith (Q 61) or our works (Q 63). Rather, the Holy Spirit awakens the faith through which we are grafted into



Christ (Q 65). Perhaps an extravagantly loving God would want to awaken such faith in everyone, and would have the capacity to do so. Perhaps God loves us all (not just some) just the way we are. Perhaps God offers salvation and the grace of saving faith to us all. If this is so, then it is predestined that we are all elected. Even if God does not force us to have faith or to believe, God's love could lure us and guide us so relentlessly that eventually we would come to have faith. Some of us may respond to the Holy Spirit and attain salvation during this lifetime while others may have to wait until the afterlife for the promptings of the Spirit to be effective.

I still reject double predestination, a doctrine which is not explicitly taught in the *Heidelberg Catechism*. The compassionate God described in the most of the confession would not preordain anyone for evil or damnation. Such a view just does not represent the God of love. Why would God create some for good and some for evil? The fact that some individuals during this lifetime manage to persistently reject the grace of a powerfully loving God is an inscrutable mystery. I do not believe that we can really understand the true nature of God or the truth about salvation while we are living as finite earthly creatures. Nothing about this issue is really "clear," and the catechism wisely refrains from undue speculation beyond the confession that "we" are chosen for eternal life. We live in the mysteries; we trust in what we cannot see; we hope and we believe. Or as Paul writes in 1 Corinthians, "For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known" (13:12). This is a hallmark of the Christian faith. We hope for salvation. We believe in salvation. Still, we don't have definitive answers because God is more than we can ever know or imagine.

The *Heidelberg Catechism* speaks of the nature of salvation in several different ways. Most centrally, it involves forgiveness, the sharing in the righteousness of Christ, and "participation in Christ and all his benefits" (Q53). The catechism affirms that we gradually

become more Christ-like as our faith deepens and grows, producing fruits of thankfulness (Q 64). God is filled with mercy for us despite our brokenness (Q 60-63). Along with the catechism, I continue to question and ponder the meaning and nature of salvation. I hope this will be a life-long wrestling as I continue to grow and experience God in new, fresh ways.

### **Trinity**

The *Heidelberg Catechism* affirms belief in God as Father and Creator, as Son and Redeemer, and as Holy Spirit and Sanctifier (Question 24). Still, the Trinity is difficult to explain and remains a paradox, and the catechism does not attempt to offer a metaphysical explanation. From our Triune God we learn to be relational and we learn about living together in community. The *Heidelberg Catechism* uses interpersonal language to describe the operations of the persons of the Trinity, and alludes to the bonds among the three Persons (Q33). By being a Trinity, God is able to reveal how there can be unity within diversity. We do not have three Gods—we have one God. Yet, God is revealed through the creation of the world, through the ministry of Jesus Christ, and through the Holy Spirit who continues to guide our lives. Extrapolating from this theme, Migliore writes that there is “a ‘mutual indwelling’ or ‘being-in-one-another.’ The three of the Trinity ‘indwell’ and pervade each other; they ‘encircle’ each other, being united in an exquisite dance...” (Kindle Location 1741). The Trinity is about friendship, family, relationships, and community. The Trinity reveals God’s compassion and empathy.

Yet, at the same time God is holy and glorious, as Question 94 makes clear. Migliore observes that “...the grace of God is expressed in God’s gift of life to the creation at the beginning and in the still greater gift of new life to fallen humanity in God’s work of salvation in Jesus Christ and in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit to renew the people of God. Instructed by the biblical witness, we know that the grace of the triune God is not cheap but costly, holy grace, and we likewise know that the holiness of the triune God is not simply purity or faultlessness that

places us under judgment but a gracious holiness” (Kindle Location 1842). The Triune God is constant—God is always faithful, always a keeper of promises and covenants. Yet, the Triune God is forever moving in new ways—God is still speaking, singing, moving, dancing, and teaching.

### **Incarnation**

A crucial tenet of the *Heidelberg Catechism* and all Reformed theology is the Incarnation. According to Question 35 Christ is fully divine and Christ is fully human. How can Christ be both? It is another paradox, another mystery. This is one of the most fundamental and prevailing aspects of the *Heidelberg Catechism* and my own faith. God coming to earth to live and breathe as a human is a powerful and amazing prospect. This reveals that God knows the full range of human emotions and feelings—God has known sorrow and anguish as well as joy (Q 44). In Christ God has rejoiced and suffered. God has been welcomed and betrayed. There is absolutely nothing that we can ever experience that God has not already personally experienced in the form of Jesus Christ. Therefore, we truly have a God who can empathize with us during our darkest moments and celebrate with us during our greatest victories. This conviction offers hope and enables us to trust fully in God’s love.

But how can this be—Jesus as human and as divine? Once again there is really no clear answer, and the *Heidelberg Catechism* is more interested in the spiritual benefits of the affirmation than in a metaphysical explanation. Migliore suggests that God, in a way that only God can do, established solidarity with humanity by become human, by becoming vulnerable. God self-limited God’s power because of God’s love for us human creatures. God became human and shared humanity’s limitations and vulnerabilities. When Jesus went to the cross, he felt the pain and the suffering (Q 44). He felt betrayal, fear, and anxiety. Through the entire passion narrative Jesus was like us and Jesus was God. God is sovereign yet this sovereignty is

paradoxically revealed and exercised through God's weakness in the Incarnation. God triumphs through suffering, through vulnerability, through weakness and, therefore, reveals a love that is deep and profound. God limited God's self in order to identify with the outcasts and to experience human emotions. As Migliore states, "God's love for the world is passionate and vulnerable. God's compassion for the poor and the suffering is real and profound. If Jesus Christ is the fullness of God's love, we know that the love of God does not spurn vulnerability and risk. There is no love without openness to rejection, suffering, and loss" (Kindle Location 1861). And so the Incarnation remains paradoxical but at the same time offers hope—hope in the power of God's vulnerable love. It also allows us to be human, to be real, and to understand that God loves us no matter who we are or what we do. And through this all God remains God.

### **Sin/Original Sin/Human Nature**

For years I have rejected the doctrine of original sin. I was always taught it was the sin that was passed onto us from Adam and Eve because of eating an apple. It was the sin of the parents cast upon the children. To me it did not seem plausible that all humans are totally depraved because of what happened way back in the Garden of Eden. To me it did not seem plausible that a loving God would punish innocent children for the sins committed by their parents. Of course, the troubling thing is that the *Heidelberg Catechism* does espouse this view of an inherited corruption (Q 7), which is nevertheless ascribed as guilt to all of us descendants of Adam and Eve.

However, in its actual practice the catechism treats Adam and Eve as symbols of human nature in general. It views sin as a universal condition of interpersonal brokenness—any kind of brokenness that prevents us from being or becoming who God created us to be. This brokenness is described as a failure to love God and neighbor (Q 4), and as a tendency to hate God and

neighbor (Q 5). And this brokenness prevents humans from having perfect relationships with God, with each other, and with all of creation. Because of our interpersonal brokenness, we make bad choices, we focus inwardly rather than outwardly, we create idols, we hurt one another, and we turn away from God. Still, God continues to love us and attempts to lure us back toward good. God wants us to make better choices, to be kind, compassionate, and empathetic with one another and with ourselves. God models this love by freely offering grace and forgiveness. God is amazing. God continues to love us despite our brokenness, despite our self-centeredness, and despite the many ways we continually stray. So, today I am able to view sin in a different way, thanks partly to the *Heidelberg Catechism*. I can begin to affirm original sin since it now has a different connotation and meaning.

If we are created in the image of God, then I believe we must have been created with a propensity toward good, as Question 9 states. But, we all incline toward self-centeredness—we think of ourselves first. Consider a baby. A baby cries to have his or her immediate needs met. Then as the baby grows into a toddler, he/she continues to be focused on self rather than others. Theories of child psychology suggest that children do not become aware of the needs of others for quite some time. And part of us always remains focused on self-preservation. We feel we need to look out for ourselves and our families before we take care of our neighbors and the world. But God has a different intention for us. God encourages us to look out for others as much as we look out for ourselves (Q 107, 111). God wants us to care for “the least of these.” Jesus’ ministry was about caring for others—those who have no food, no shelter, no drink, no clothes, and those who are in prison. When we care for the least of these we care for Jesus—for God. Still our egocentric ways prevent us from fully responding to God’s call and we remain broken.

The *Heidelberg Catechism* believes sin is expressed in many forms. Its focus on the need to trust God (as in Question 26) implies that our root problem is that we lack such trust, and that our resultant fears and anxieties motivate our suspicions, jealousies, and hatreds. We were created to rely on God but we do not fully trust and we believe we need to take care of ourselves. In the Gospel of Matthew we find these words:

Therefore, I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing. Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying “What will we eat?” or “What will we drink?” or “What will we wear?” For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. (Matthew 7: 25-33).

The rhetoric of the *Heidelberg Catechism* implies that we are insecure children who feel we have been abandoned. Our fears and anxieties can manifest themselves as pride—the need for more power and more control—or sloth—the attempt to self-mediate or turn to addicting behaviors. We try to escape from our anxieties; we try to find a way to feel secure. We turn to

materials methods—more money, more alcohol—we turn to others who we feel can alleviate our fears. These self-defeating strategies are called “idolatry” in the catechism. In reality, we need to turn toward God—God who created us, who loves us endlessly, and who is a keeper of promises. The catechism prays that we shall “shift our trust away from all creatures” and place it in God alone (Q 125). In God we can find the security and the love we crave so desperately. Still, in our humanness we forget and we need to be reminded over and over. Here lies the nature of sin. We fear that we must take care of ourselves, and this fear generates all sorts of brokenness. And still, God loves us and offers forgiveness and grace freely.

### **Justification/Sanctification**

The *Heidelberg Catechism* insists that we are justified by God’s grace (Q 60-63). Question 61 makes it clear that there is absolutely nothing we can do to deserve this grace yet God endlessly offers it to us. We are not justified because we do good works. We are not justified because we love others. We are not justified because we follow the law. Rather, all we need do is turn toward God and believe in God’s mercy (Q 61). However, it is important to note that this trust in God’s graciousness is not the product of our own agency. Justification is God’s action toward us—it is not dependent upon anything that we can do. Our response to God’s action is to worship and glorify God, to trust and believe in God, and to do our best to change the way we live in relationship to God, to our fellow humans, and to all of creation (Q 86). We become disciples of Christ. We grow in faith, in love, in maturity, in holiness. Discipleship has many joys—the joy of loving God, the joy of being in relationship with others, the joy of reaching out to the least of these. But there are also costs—we are transformed by God’s love and grace. And so slowly we become sanctified, we become more like Christ. In the words of the catechism, “we may be transformed more and more into the image of God more and more, until we achieve full perfection after this life” (Q115).

This sanctification, affirmed by the catechism, is a daunting prospect. Can we become more holy? Does this mean that we become more like God? Does this mean that we stop sinning and live perfectly pious lives immediately? Certainly not! Migliore explains, “Becoming holy or sanctified in the New Testament sense means being conformed to the image of Christ by the working of the Holy Spirit in our lives. The essential mark of this Christlikeness is that free- self-giving, other-regarding love that the New Testament calls agape” (Kindle Location 4848). Question 86 suggests much the same thing when it talks about being renewed in the image of Christ and glorifying God through our lives, a theme which is elaborated in terms of our duties to God and our neighbors described in the Decalogue. Moved by the Spirit, we begin to look out for others, to take care of others, to cease to be so me-focused. We look out for others and take care of others even if they are not like us, even if they are strangers, and even if they are our enemies. Slowly, gradually we begin to practice the love that God reveals to us through Jesus Christ. We begin to be more concerned about those living on the margins of society. We begin to be concerned about those who suffer in poverty. We begin to release our anxieties about our first world problems and focus on what really matters—taking care of those who cannot care for themselves. As I write about this, my mind turns to the hymn *They Will Know We Are Christians by Our Love* (Scholtes). When we are faithful, when we believe that God justifies us freely, when we grow in faith and in holiness, our concern is to “guard each one’s dignity and save each one’s pride.” When we are sanctified, we are truly able to show that we are Christians through our love, our actions, and our presence in this suffering world.

### **Reformed and Reforming**

Human words are never going to be adequate enough to explain God and God’s love for humanity. We Christians have tried and have fallen short. God is larger than any box we might try to fit God into. God is, in the terms of the Oglala Lakota, the Mysterious Creator. And, I am



comfortable living in the mysteries and the paradoxes. God's power is the power of love. God loves us all. God loves all of creation. This is the essential message of the *Heidelberg Catechism* that we need to continually share today. We need to shout it out so that it is heard. The Good News is that God is there for everyone and everything all the time. God's love is never-ending. God loves us so much that God was willing to come to earth, to become human, to teach us, and to guide us. God wants to include everyone and to welcome everyone. The structure and main themes of the *Heidelberg Catechism* suggest that God went to the cross because the way to triumph is not through coercive power and control, but through self-humbling, through loving everyone, and through giving away rather than storing up. The way is love, peace, grace, mercy, forgiveness, and reconciliation. For me, this is the message of Reformed theology—this is the message of the United Church of Christ. We need not focus on material wealth. We need not count the number of our good works. Rather, the central issue is: how are we loving God, loving our neighbors, loving ourselves, and loving our enemies? We are human. God is divine. We will continue to wrestle, question, ponder, and struggle. We will merely see the picture dimly in this human life but there will come a time when we are face to face with God and then we will truly understand.

We must always be reforming, always be looking toward Scripture in the context of our lives today. We must always wrestle, reflect, ruminate, and pray. We must encourage people to ask questions and accept the reality that we will not all come to the same answers or conclusions. The *Heidelberg Catechism* affirms that God is loving, that God is powerful, and that God is our creator and faithful sustainer. God is a keeper of promises and covenants; God wants us to trust in God's benevolence; God is good all the time. In our humanness, there will be times of division, times of brokenness, and times when we are resistant to change. Still, we are all children of God and God continues to urge us forward. Jesus was not satisfied with the status

quo. The great cloud of witnesses who surround us, including the authors of the *Heidelberg Catechism*, struggled with interpreting Scripture and defining doctrinal issues. And, so do we. Hopefully, we do it with openness, with love, with the knowledge that there will always be mysteries and paradoxes ... and this is okay. Peace and Amen.

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