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Reformed and Re-forming:

Rediscovering the Heidelberg Catechism in the Church of Today

I must confess that when I first began to study the history of the Reformed faith tradition, I had serious doubts as to whether it was a tradition that I would be able to embrace as my own. Many historical Reformed documents like the Heidelberg Catechism— one of the confessional documents upon which a major strand of my professed tradition (the United Church of Christ) was established—are grounded in a view of God that seemed to be very different from my own. This created great conflict for me. My uneasiness with the differences of opinion I found in the espoused theology of the early Reformed documents only seemed to perpetuate my preexisting religious anxieties. My subsequent preoccupation with these differences fostered an environment of thinking that was an unpleasant place to reside. I henceforth found myself asking some pretty serious questions: “with so many differences at hand, how can I claim the Reformed faith as my own? If I don’t believe in all of what this tradition is founded on, can I really claim to be part of the tradition?”

In retrospect, I think that this was a rather narrow way of approaching a school of theological thought. And yet, this totalitarian approach to belief systems that I was practicing is all too often endorsed within our culture. One need only take a look at our country’s current political landscape to see that absolute thinking is alive and well. The two mainstream political parties of our society continue to widen their divide by polarizing on certain issues. Moreover, the Reformed tradition itself began on a platform of absolute claims. An effort to “reclaim the

church” from the corruptions of the medieval Catholics, the Protestant reformers set forth specific institutes to define their faith.

Now I cannot say that absolutist thinking is *always* bad. It offers clarity and peace of mind, to be sure. However, the unfortunate reality is that it can become intellectually stifling when used to approach complex issues. Few would disagree that there are few things less complex than religion! In the case of my study of the Heidelberg Catechism, I now am able to see that my initial fear of the differences I saw between my own theology and the theology espoused within the catechism had hindered me from being able to recognize many of the beautiful enduring concepts found within its words. By approaching my religious study with an “all or nothing” approach, I was forcing myself to discard many of the wonderful faith expressions found within this ancient text.

It has subsequently become a concern of mine that Christians should remain open-minded as to how we interpret differences of opinion—theological or otherwise—as well as the history of the church. Dr. Marcia McFee, a teacher of emergent worship development and the creator of worshipdesignstudio.com, often shares in her teaching about the history of Christian worship that the Latin root of the word “tradition” (*traditio*) means *to hand over*, not *to hold on*. Her statement has some significant implications about how we should view the historical documents and theologies of our traditions. They remain significant sources and resources for our faith. However, we cannot deny that every Christian denomination was created within a specific culture, at a specific time, for a specific purpose. These historical specificities do not change. If we deny ourselves the right to reexamine and reevaluate the tenants of our faith within our modern cultural context and experience, I believe that we deny ourselves the right to the very process by which the Reformed tradition was created. Just as the Protestant Reformers of the 16th century sought to re-form the church out of its human brokenness, we too, I believe, are

called as the church of today to continue the process of re-forming the church. The traditions of our church have been passed on to us. It is now our responsibility to lift them up and create something new with them. If we fail to do this, the Church may fail to speak to the society of today, and may fail in its mission.

Finding Common Ground

That said the process of reforming and reevaluating the church is not an easy task. Nor is it often a quick process. Rather, much thought and theological reflection obviously must go into the process. Both the old and the new must be placed side by side; and meaningful conversation must take place between the two. Christian faith explorers of today must be willing to traverse the gray area where all differing opinions are fully visible. I believe that it is through this honest process of honoring the past and embracing new perspectives and realities that the Reformed church of yesterday can become a remarkable reforming church of today.

If we are going to examine the historical traditions—the inherited religious heirlooms—of our Reformed faith, we must necessarily take a good look at the Heidelberg Catechism. This catechism was a monumental statement of faith in its day. Crafted in order to create peace between two warring traditions, this creed sought to bring about peace by establishing the religious tenants held in common faith between the Lutheran and the Calvinist churches of 16th century Heidelberg and the Palatinate. A good read of the Catechism will reveal that the greatest tenant of faith upheld is the reality of a *wholly loving, ever-present God*. This sheer reality should be enough for us to acknowledge how valuable this catechism is for the modern day church—a church that is largely focused on the task of cultural reconciliation through God's love. But the catechism, like the people who wrote it, is hardly perfect. Indeed it contains some statements that are problematic to modern theologians. We needn't speculate that the writers of the Heidelberg Catechism were less theologically skilled or insightful than those of today. To

imply this would be highly inappropriate. Rather, as was said earlier, we are wise to recognize that the writers of the Heidelberg Catechism were writing in a specific time, for a specific purpose, and with a specific mindset that was appropriate for the culture in which they lived and functioned. Like these ancient writers, the church leaders of today are called to theologize to meet the needs and goals of today's churches. Therefore, in the spirit of the Reformed tradition, I do not believe it is inappropriate for us to reevaluate particular statements within the Heidelberg Catechism in light of our modern understandings of God.

A Slightly Different Perspective

Up to this point I've alluded a lot to the need for open-minded, free thinking in the church of today. To embrace this free thinking frankly creates a good amount of space for some chaos to take place. (Change is often the bringer of chaos in the church!) My semi-comfortable acceptance of chaos and questioning, however, would not likely have been shared by the early theologians of the Reformed tradition. The reality of chaos and uncertainty was all too real a concern for the European Reformers. John Calvin's arrival in Geneva was on the heels of a great political, societal, and moral upheaval. The life experiences and social environment of the Reformers warranted many of them to subsequently develop a strong aversion to chaos and human corruption. As such, many of the early Reformers sought to establish a faith tradition built upon the promise of God's absolute control. To place absolute control in the hands of God provided comfort to the souls of a society that had experienced firsthand the wickedness of humanity and the corrupted church. Such a need for comfort is demonstrated in the opening question of the Catechism:

Question 1: What is your only comfort in life and death?

That I belong, both body and soul and in life and in death, not to myself, but to my faithful savior Jesus Christ...who takes care of me so well that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in Heaven...

To create a religious culture of absolute control required that the early Reformers reevaluate many of the doctrines and theologies of the existing [Catholic] church in 16th century Europe. Although the theme of absolute divine foreordination had been present in some strands of medieval theology, it usually had not been a dominant motif. Like Zwingli and Calvin, the Heidelberg Catechism created a stronger focus on the sovereignty and providence of God over the church and humanity. In his own *Institutes*, Calvin refers to God as “The Keeper of the Keys.” Indeed, the Heidelberg Catechism stressed Calvin’s reality that God is the author and ordainer of *all things that come to pass*.

Question 27: *What do you understand by the providence of God?*

The almighty and everywhere present power of God, through which God still sustains heaven and earth, together with all creatures, as if by God’s own hand. God’s power so governs them 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.

There are many descendents of the Reformed tradition, such as the Presbyterian Church in America and the Christian Reformed Church, that continue to adhere to Calvin’s ideas and teachings about providence and absolute foreordination to this day.

The Heidelberg Catechism also implies the absolute authority and the divine source of scripture. While there is no question that specifically addresses the source of the Holy Scriptures, question 19, for example, states that we know the nature of Christ “From the Holy Gospel, which God’s own self revealed in the beginning in the Garden of Eden...” Similar language is interspersed throughout the catechism. Daniel Migliore, professor emeritus of theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, points out in his book *Faith Seeking Understanding* that such a view of the Holy Scriptures was necessary for the goals of the Protestant Reformers and was intensified by the church’s later struggles with reductively rationalistic modernity:

“[The Biblicist view of scripture] arose out of the church’s efforts to defend its faith against the acids of modernity. Anxious to protect the insights of the Reformation, Protestant theologians became increasingly defensive and strident in their claims about the supernatural nature of scripture (47).”

For the early Reformers, the authority of scripture was not only seen as a function of its status as the inspired word of God, but it was bound heavily to Scripture’s proclamation of new life and freedom [from chaos] in Christ (Migliore 46). (I would also say of the last statement that it is a truth held today by *many* different Christian traditions, both within and outside the Reformed tradition. Denominations like the Southern Baptist Convention, the Christian Reformed Church, the Reformed Church in America, and the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) are still very Calvinist in their teachings about providence and Scripture.)

But as I have come to understand, there are yet other church bodies descended from the Reformed tradition that exist today that look at divine and scriptural authority rather differently. In today’s modern landscape there are many who *do not* resonate with the absolute authority vested by the confessional documents of the classical Reformed tradition. Slowly, the affects of the enlightenment and modernity *have* pervaded the culture of many churches. The free thinking encouraged in modernity has created a culture of distrust among some, who are suspicious of the church’s historical practices of teaching [and using] the words of the Bible in a literal way. Such practices, many would argue, have led to elitism within the polis of the church and the alienation of those deemed as outsiders. Migliore points out that there is, interestingly, significant Biblical support for the criticism of the church’s practice of approaching religion with absolute teaching:

“Within the biblical witness, there is relentless criticism of every authority that identifies itself with the ultimate authority of God. Jesus refused to ascribe ultimacy either to religious doctrines and traditions (Matt 5:21; Mark 11:28) or to the claims of the state

(Mark 12:13-17). The apostle Paul distinguished between written codes that kill and the Spirit that gives new life (2 Cor. 3:6) (46).”

Now I think it is important to reiterate that I am not saying that *all* absolute religious statements are bad. They are, in fact, what make up the words of our affirmations of faith. The task for today’s churches is effectively to be clear in what we believe without claiming to have *all of the answers*. The United Church of Christ’s phrase “God is Still Speaking” is perhaps the best example of this philosophy. God’s revelation is ongoing. Even in the pages of the Holy Scriptures God has not finished revealing all of Godself to humanity. It is therefore inappropriate (and frankly dishonest) for the church to claim that it has answers to all matters of faith and crisis. To question matters of faith and importance is not blasphemous. I would argue that, contrastingly, it is such questioning that ends up strengthening our understanding of God.

My overall response to the Reformed tradition, particularly that strand of it rooted in the *Heidelberg Catechism*, is that it is steeped in thoughtful, sound theology. Birthed with the best of intentions at a time when strong, grounded faith was needed, the Reformed tradition has effectively ministered to generations of believers for half a millennium. With its strength of conviction, emphasis on the goodness of God and salvation through Jesus Christ, this tradition is in no way irrelevant to us today. Yet 450 years after the writing of the *Heidelberg Catechism*, we live in a society that has been irreparably influenced by the advances of science and the effects of modernity. Many of us believe that it is appropriate that God has been understood in new ways over the past 450 years. We are able to see the scriptures in a different light. As the church of today, we therefore have the responsibility of approaching our exploration of faith and tradition with this revised understanding. Donald McKim, professor emeritus of Theology at Memphis Theological Seminary and University of Dubuque Theological Seminary, affirms in his book *Introducing the Reformed Faith* that “we believe that God has given us minds to know God

and hearts to love God” (12). McKim’s theological views of providence and scripture are more conservative than those of Migliore or myself, but he is a good example of another Reformed theologian who actively attempts to reevaluate the Reformed faith within a contemporary context. As his writing implies, the knowledge that we acquire is effectively a gift from God, and we should use it to understand God in new and clearer ways.

The spirit of the Reformed church is that we are *Reformed and reforming*. The ideas and theologies expressed in the ancient catechisms and confessions were analogous and appropriate to the times and cultures in which they were written. It is no different or less appropriate therefore, that the church of today should embark on the same type of quest for true faith as was undertaken by our Reformed predecessors. We are merely on a different stretch of road. As a future generation, our hindsight has been gifted with additional insights and understandings to allow us to continue to move the tradition forward—making it relevant for our current times. What follows is my discussion of several important tenets of the Reformed Christian faith, their manifestation in the *Heidelberg Catechism*, and my personal commentary about how I feel these important theological concepts can continue to be relevant and/or re-imagined to better speak within a contemporary context.

The Nature of God

Above all things, the trajectory from Karl Barth through post-liberalism affirms that God’s nature is that of a wholly loving, self-giving, divine Parent. This is, without any doubt, the biggest crux of my faith. It is the revelation that reveals all other revelations; the lens through which all matters of faith are to be viewed. The well-known phrase “God is Love” bears witness to the truth that we encounter God and God’s character through the act of loving and being loved. Many contemporary Reformed understandings of providence, revelation, salvation, Jesus Christ, and humanity are all governed by this principle. To view God as the Divine

embodiment of perfect love is a classic Reformed practice. The Heidelberg Catechism is steeped with language describing God as a loving, involved, ever-present Creator.

Most significantly, part two of the Catechism asserts that we are saved entirely by divine grace revealed through Jesus Christ. The grace and forgiveness granted us through Christ are *freely given* (Q. 21). We can do nothing in our broken state that could warrant such extravagant treatment. It is only by God's loving nature that God chooses to save and redeem humanity through the grace of Jesus Christ. Moreover, if Jesus is the human manifestation of God (see Q. 15-18) we must recognize that Jesus' nature was wholly loving. His was a ministry of reconciliation and forgiveness. He was perpetually concerned with the restoration and well-being of all people, but, as some New Testament studies have taught us, especially those who are marginalized and victimized. If we profess Jesus to be one with God the Creator, then we must profess the nature of Jesus to be God's nature.

Believing in a loving God is comforting; but that belief can prove to be hard to hold onto amidst the strife of our earthly home. Our understanding of God's nature is deeply enmeshed in our understanding of God's interaction with creation. As such, one of the most challenging issues of faith that we must address is that of God's providence. In a natural world that is full of chaos and imminent danger, our worrisome human minds can scarcely rest amidst sentiments of ambiguity over the idea of divine providence.

As the Reformed movement was birthed in a time of great conflict and chaos, the traditional view of God of the Reformed faith is logically that of a mighty and controlling God. We can recall that the opening question of the Catechism states that "not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven." Question 26 states that we believe God "...sustains and governs [heaven and earth] by divine eternal council and providence." As was said before, a strong emphasis on the sovereignty of God was comforting to the Protestant

Reformers. Question 26 enforces this when it goes on to say that: “I so completely trust in God that I have no doubt that God will provide me with everything necessary for body and soul.”

A benevolent dictator of sorts, the God depicted in the *Heidelberg Catechism* is the divine controller of all creation; the One who wills all that has been, is, and will be. Yet for all of the comfort that such a divine image brought to early Reformed worshipers, it is prone to create as much discomfort for many postmodern worshipers. Contemporary theologians actively wrestle with the ancient answers to theological questions that seem to give birth to conflict and paradox.

Not the least of these questions is in relation of the existence of evil—theodicy. *If God is professed to be the ordainer of all things, then does God ordain and will acts of evil in the world?* Is God the author of evil? If not, then who or what is? How can God be the ordainer of all things and *not* be the author of evil acts and events? The traditional answer to this question would be that yes, God does in fact ordain even evil to take place—so that it may somehow be used to show and bring forth God’s glory and goodness. McKim writes that “the answer of Christian faith to the problem of evil is that God can bring good out of evil and has the power to do so” (52). I certainly believe that God has the power to use anything for good (for God is indeed the perfect embodiment of goodness); but in my mind the historical answer to this question is incomplete and inadequate. If God created everything to be *good*, then why is there any need for the existence of evil?

In response to this question, simply put, I don’t believe that God ordains or even creates evil. And yet, I would agree with McKim’s statement that God is able to use acts of evil for good. I think Migliore says it more succinctly:

“Tyranny, injustice, social breakdown, war and other evil events are not caused by God but have their origin in the misuse of the creatures’ freedom. Nevertheless, God permits

these events to occur and uses them to accomplish the divine purpose. God exercises sovereignty over evil by bringing good out of what by itself is only negative and destructive” (122).

This forms the basis of my personal theodicy. Evil is not of God. It is neither created nor ordained by God. Acts of evil and the presence of evil are solely the work of the members of creation itself. Augustine defined evil “...not [as] a substance, but [as] the perversion of a nature that is essentially good” (McKim 38). McKim goes on to define evil as “that which opposes God and God’s will” (52). I would endeavor to further define evil as *that which is not of God*. Evil can be an act or a tangible thing. It can also be the manifest result of a life spent in separation from God. (Affirming that God is supremely good and actively involved with creation, it would have to be said that any state of separation or evil character experienced by a person or other creature must be entirely voluntary.) Much in the same way, I would define sin as *that which separates us from God*. Sin can be a specific act or behavior; but it can also be a state of being. To fail to live a life in tune with God’s spirit is to live a life of sin.

There is some room for interpretation as to how the writers of the *Heidelberg Catechism* felt about the existence of evil. God’s providence operative in all things is clearly attested to, to be sure. The language surrounding the explanation of evil is somewhat vague, however.

Question 26 does say that:

“...whatever evil God sends to me in this trouble life God will transform to my good, for God is able to do it, being almighty, and God is also willing to do it, being a faithful father.”

This could be interpreted as implying that God wills evil to take place. But it is not as clear as the later Westminster Confession of the Presbyterian church which openly states that God ordains both good and evil things to take place. No such statement is directly stated in the

Heidelberg Catechism. One could argue that this aids significantly with promoting the image of a loving, nurturing God within the Catechism.

One thing is very clear: that is, that God desires for us to live in constant communion with God and to follow God's ways. In addition, as we exist in what we perceive to be a broken world, people often have an inherent tendency to refer to things that bring about pain and suffering as "evils." I see a need to be cautious of this practice and to also be realistic about the nature of creation. Some of the pain and suffering that we experience is merely a part of natural existence—an unfortunate product of being vulnerable creatures. To be human is to be finite. To be finite is to be susceptible to limitations and restrictions. While such things are woefully unpleasant to be sure, I feel we are remiss to call all such hardships "evils."

Now that the issue of theodicy has been addressed, what is to be said for the nature of God's providence? I believe that we can profess God to be the ordainer of all *good* things. To deny God as being the source of evil hardly negates God's power and sovereignty. This opinion seems to be shared by both Migliore and McKim. Nonetheless, while these theologians each have slightly different perspectives, they seem to concur that the classic theodicy of the Reformed tradition is flawed. Donald McKim sufficiently explains God's providence as having three parts: God preserves creation, God cooperates with creation (and subsequently respects the nature of our free will), and God *guides* all things toward the accomplishment of God's ultimate purposes (47). Contrary to the more Calvinistic traditional view of God as benevolent dictator, in this view God has no need to micromanage the events of creation. Though God surely has the power to influence all things, God is steady in upholding the natural order God created through divine freedom.

Although the *Heidelberg Catechism* does not stress human freedom, subsequent Reformed theologians have suggested that all creatures and human beings are gifted with the power and

opportunity to act freely within this natural world. God might not preordain our actions, but God can and does often influence and direct us to make good choices. For God's will to be effective in our lives we must, however, have a personal commitment to experience the moving of the spirit and have a heart open to the power of God's love. To live with free will means that we have the option to not hear and follow God.

Even so, in the face of evil God is still present and watches over God's creation—guiding and utilizing (but not necessarily ordaining) all events (both good and bad) to ultimately achieve God's purposes. Even if God may not be the ordainer of evil and sadness, God is ever-present with us and has the power to shape the events of our lives to form a good end result. We cannot always be sure of God's intentions and outcomes; but through Christ we know that God desires to be intimately connected to humanity. Through God's special providence, the life of Jesus Christ, we can believe that God is intimately invested in the welfare of humanity. Through the worst of events that we may experience in our physical state, we can be assured of God's unending presence with us and the promise of salvation given through Jesus Christ. Using the words to the answer of Question 18, "our Lord Jesus Christ...is freely given to us for total redemption and righteousness."

God's Revelation to Humanity

Scripture and creation (nature) are two of the most important sources of God's revelation to humanity. That said, I feel it is also important to recognize that there are many other ways in which God's presence has been manifested. God's nature is complex; and as such we are wise to look for revelations of God's divine goodness all around us. As Daniel Migliore points out, to search for God's revelation in only one source or place could severely limit one's experience of God. He goes on to say that "...it is a mistake to equate knowledge of God with mere information" (23).

While it sounds as though this statement could contradict the Reformed tradition's belief in the importance of scripture as a primary source of revelation, no such conclusion is implied in Migliore's writing. He stresses the importance of scripture by noting that it is a valuable source of historical accounts of God's interaction with humanity. It is a testament to God's desire and historical efforts to be in solidarity with humanity. Scripture is a witness to us that God's revelation to humanity *is deeply personal* (35). Migliore says that "to speak of the authority of the Bible rightly is to speak of its power by God's Spirit to help create and nourish...new life in relationship with God and with others (50)." God does not merely interact with humanity as a whole, but is intimately connected in the life of each person on a profound level. McKim also affirms this belief when he states that "God's purpose in revelation is to reconnect with humanity..." (15). I resonate with this understanding of scripture's role in God's revelation. To recognize the Bible's inherent worth as a collection of historical narratives telling God's interactions with humanity does not require one to believe in a literal interpretation of the Biblical texts. While I do not view all of the stories of the Bible to be historical reality, I still align with the Reformed tradition's profession of the importance of scripture in the revelation of God.

Interestingly, the Heidelberg Catechism does not contain a section specifically addressing the exact nature of God's revelation in Scripture. However, its language surrounding the authority (and source) of scripture is a pretty clear indication that the early Reformers regarded the Holy Scriptures as a primary source of God's special revelation to humanity.

The Life and Work of Jesus Christ

While scripture, nature, and a myriad of other sources help us to build a greater understanding of God's character, the *Heidelberg Catechism* implicitly suggests that God's greatest revelation of Godself to humanity up to the current day was manifest in the life of Jesus

Christ. This has very strong implications for the Christian faith. As I have said, the foundation of my faith rests on the reality that God is supremely loving. God's goodness has been shown to me in my life in a multitude of ways; but without a doubt, God's image and goodness of character are most clearly revealed in the person and life of Jesus Christ. This is very much in agreement with the Reformed tradition. The language of the *Heidelberg Catechism* affirms that in matters of God's revelation, Jesus Christ is the clearest understanding of God and of God's purpose that has yet been revealed to humanity. The answer to Question 31 states that "he [Christ] is ordained by God the Father and anointed by the Holy Spirit to be our ultimate prophet and teacher, who fully reveals to us God's secret council and will concerning our redemption...". Daniel Migliore successfully clarifies our understanding of Christ's role in God's special revelation to humanity by asserting that:

"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" (35).

While God's revelation to humanity can be manifest in religious propositions, historical events and facts, the experience of art and music, and a personal experience and awareness of God, our greatest understanding of God's revelation must come from an interpersonal knowledge—namely the knowledge of Jesus Christ (Migliore 35).

I feel I should say at this point that, while I believe Jesus to be the ultimate revelation of God, I do not devalue other religions as being devoid of revelations of their own. God, in God's vastness and interconnectedness to creation, is intimately connected in a variety of different ways to a variety of different cultures. By acknowledging this, Christians and non-Christians alike can stand to learn a great deal about the expansive and diverse nature of God from each other.

God Seeks to be in Solidarity with Us

Just as the purpose of God's revelation through Jesus is to reconnect with humanity (McKim 15), Jesus sought in His life and death to achieve the same goal. Again using the answer to Question 18, we affirm that "Christ is freely given to us for [our] total redemption and righteousness." Through no more effective way could God have sought to connect with humanity than by becoming fully human Godself. Such was the solidarity sought by God with humanity that God was fully willing to humble Godself to the degree of taking on our form. In so doing, God freely experienced *all* aspects of human life. All raw emotions—happiness, sadness, anger, terror, betrayal, conviction, rejection, and pain, gruesome awful pain—were experienced by Jesus in his life here on earth. Through the Christ event God made God's ultimate attempt to reach, reclaim, and redeem humanity. In the time of Jesus' earthly life, humanity had become lost and broken by wandering away from God's presence. Through knowing Jesus we are exposed to God in a way that moves us beyond retreat. In Jesus we find all the goodness, graciousness, and holiness needed to inspire us to live within God's presence and solidarity. It is a joyous revelation to learn of God's love for us shown through Jesus Christ. It is one that humanity starves for.

If we believe that Jesus' life on earth was an entirely voluntary act of God's good desire to be in solidarity with us, it makes the discussion of Jesus' death imperative. The great Christological question is: *Was Jesus' death necessary?* It is not a topic easily discussed. I have wrestled with this question for many years. Over the years I've relied on various theories; but in the light of a newfound understanding, I must assuredly confess that I believe it to be true that Jesus' death was every bit as necessary for our redemption as was Jesus' life. We cannot merely sit on this truth, however. We must examine *why* it was necessary for Jesus to sacrifice Himself *to us*.

It is on this subject that I must take departure from the realm of classical Reformed theology. The classical Reformed interpretation of Christ's death is based largely in Anselm's theology of *satisfaction* and in theories of *penal substitutionary* atonement. Within this classical understanding, Christ's death was the act of paying our debt to God for our human sinfulness. Through His death, Jesus effectively took upon himself the wrath and judgment that we were bound to face for our sins. In His death, *our debt is paid and our sins are forgiven*. This Christology is strong upheld within the *Heidelberg Catechism*, especially in the language of questions 12-17. This traditional view is reflective of the recurring Old Testament image of the sacrificial lamb being offered to God as a plea for forgiveness.

While this theological understanding has been heavily supported by the Reformed churches for centuries, there are a number of reasons as to why I cannot agree with this point of view. First and foremost, as seen through the lens of God's love and with an understanding of God's solidarity with humanity, such an event would work directly against everything I believe to be true about the nature of God. My greatest qualm with the language of the *Heidelberg Catechism* is the apparent dichotomy that exists between the loving language it uses to portray God and its espoused theology that seems to depict an angry God obsessed with retribution for human sinfulness. If God is a God of love and forgiveness, then I surely cannot image (let alone worship) a God that would require the sacrifice of God's only Son in order to appease divine punitive wrath over the sins of lowly creatures. Such an image conjures up a God that is vengeful and bloodthirsty. God is surely concerned with justice, but not to the point of requiring the vengeful destruction of God's only child.

Secondly, while there are many scripture passages used to support this classic view, there are other ways in which this view of Christ's atonement is in direct contradiction with several parts of scripture. The most striking example is the beginning of the Gospel of John, where it is

stated that: “In the Beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He [Jesus] was in the beginning with God.” I choose to place my understanding of grace and forgiveness upon a deeper reality found in this text. It is stated numerous times throughout the Bible that our sins are forgiven through Jesus Christ. Therefore, if Christ was in the beginning with God, and the Word is God, then would not the words of Jesus (that our sins are forgiven) imply that we have already been justified through God’s grace? In this circumstance, no sacrificial death of anyone would be needed in order to effectuate the forgiveness of our sins. From the very beginning of time, grace was and is a part of the very nature and intent of God.

Moreover, such an event of wrathful killing damages the very nature of the social Trinity. If we claim God to be Three in One and One in Three, then we affirm the Biblical truth that Jesus was both fully human and fully God. The three persons of the Trinity are distinguishable but equal dimensions of God, manifested in the revelation of God to humanity. I struggle to understand a logic that states that one aspect of God must punish another aspect of Godself for something that God did not do or have any part of. Again, this fosters an anti-justice view of God.

Lastly and certainly not least importantly, is the reality that this view of atonement may perpetuate a culture of violence and lack of justice within the church and society. The very language used by traditions who affirm sacrificial atonement is steeped in violence: “*We have been ransomed by Christ’s blood.*” “*The battle has been won!*” “*Christ hath slain and conquered sin with his precious blood.*” “*God’s wrath is satisfied.*” For me, all of these statements conjure images of war, battle, and death. War was not, however, a large part of Jesus’ vocabulary. In fact, in the passion story we see that God’s method to power and authority is exactly *opposite* of our human model. *Christ does not conquer sin and death through war or battle. Christ became powerful through extraordinary weakness, sacrifice and vulnerability.* To

pursue Christian faith oblivious to this fact is dangerous. Much of the “scandal of particularity” that Migliore speaks of in his book is brought about by this loveless, conquering theology.

If we look closely at the person of Jesus, we will be unable to ignore the fact that His life and work focused primarily on reconciliation and forgiveness. Jesus was an outspoken advocate for peace, justice, mercy, and forgiveness. Jesus’ life was the modeling of God’s love for humanity. In the understanding of God’s nature and Jesus’ life work, I must claim, rather than a substitutionary atonement, the reality of Jesus’ *representative* atonement. In this view, Jesus’ death on the cross is representative not only of our own salvation, but of the *suffering of God*. In support of the idea of a representative atonement, theologian Dorthy Sölle makes an interesting observation. Migliore summarizes a point of her argument in his book:

“The world of substitution is the impersonal world of replaceable things. When a part of a machine wears out, a new part can be substituted. Representation, however, belongs in the world of persons and personal relationships. A representative stands in for us, speaks and acts for us, without simply displacing us. In other words, a representative does not divest us of our responsibility (184-185).”

To be sure, Jesus’ crucifixion was a consequence of His denial of human authority. His radical lifestyle would have been condemned by almost any culture in which he could have lived. Yet we should not deny that God certainly had the power to escape such torment. It is in this reality that we find what makes the nature and purpose of Christ’s death truly remarkable: Christ died willingly not just for our own salvation, but in order that God might take on our human suffering. In so doing, God through Jesus fully experienced all of our human pain, brokenness, and alienation. God could have performed no great act of love and solidarity than to humble Godself to the degree to which God would willingly experience our broken state. *This*, truly, is amazing grace! God’s dramatic effort to reach out to humanity through God’s son is able to

successfully rebuild the broken relationship between God and humanity. In Jesus' death our pain and brokenness are redeemed. In Jesus' resurrection we too receive new life with Christ. The *Heidelberg Catechism* itself points to Christ's solidarity with us in our sufferings in Question 44, and the affirmation of new life in Christ is celebrated in Question 45.

Where does all of this fit in the Church of today?

The theological interpretation of the life and purpose of Christ previously explained is extremely relevant to the growing culture of political and cultural awareness within our modern world. Greater numbers of people are now becoming more involved in issues of social justice and peace. For those who devote their lives to pursuing these causes, a Christology that promotes a God of grace and reconciliation is crucial. Too many people today have lost faith in the church because of unhealthy practices and theologies that have gone on for too long. It is time for the church to recover a theology that no longer condones violence and elitism.

Migliore points out that, under the influence of substitutionary atonement, grace becomes conditional. But conditional grace is not in fact gracious at all (184). To a new generation of potential Christians who are devoted to the cause of justice for all, the concept of conditional grace is a laughable affront to respectable religion. It is an oxymoron. In God's loving relationship with humanity I believe that grace is and *has always been* freely given. God's very nature is grace and love. This not only affects how we see the crucifixion, it also affects the reality of our salvation. I am a strong proponent of the idea of universal grace. Indeed, as Migliore states so well: "Jesus cannot be properly understood if he is seen apart from the covenant of God with the people of Israel or if the scope of his saving work is limited to certain individuals or to a select group rather than reaching out to the whole creation. (167)." Through Jesus, God sought to reconcile all of humanity to Godself...not just a select few people. To believe otherwise trivializes Jesus' sacrifice.

God's historical behavior has always been to coax us toward redemption. God desires our reconciliation and redemption and works toward these ends. Through the ages God's people have been given innumerable chances to be at one with God. Those chances continue even today because of the love manifest in the representative *at-one-ment* of Jesus. The root of the word atonement literally means *to be at one with...* to be in unity. How obvious this at-one-ment becomes within an understanding of Jesus' representation of both our humanness and God's divinity on the cross!

All this said, despite its adherence to the conceptuality of substitutionary atonement, the language of grace still shines through in the words of the *Heidelberg Catechism*. The document's most basic dynamic is the celebration of God's reconciling grace in Jesus Christ and the comfort to be found in it. Let us use Question 60 as an example:

Question 60: *How are you righteous before God?*

Only by true faith in Jesus Christ. Although my conscience accuses me that I have terribly sinned against all the commandments of God, and have not kept any of them, and that I am still always prone to all evil, nevertheless God, without any merit of my own, out of sheer grace, grants and imputes to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ..."

Herein rests an example of an historical statement wherein two conceptualities may coexist. The logic of retributive justice is different from the logic of unconditional grace. If we are to move forward into a new era of the church's ministry without forgetting our rootage in the past, we must be more diligent in our effort to not deny the ancient confessional documents of the church; but rather, embrace them with new understanding. While contemporary Christians may question some of the tenants found within the *Heidelberg Catechism*, as a whole it can remain a powerful testament to the historical revelation of grace to the church within a radically different historical context and culture.

With strong ties to many of the historical roots of the Reformed tradition, a revised theology of grace can maintain and honor our historical roots while regaining a central focus on promoting a culture of love and reconciliation. Whereas sin and personal salvation have been strong traditional focuses of the tradition, I propose that what modern society really needs is a greater emphasis on the love and reconciliation found in Jesus. To be sure, sin and salvation are extremely important, but we must not forget that Christ's greatest commandment to us was to "Love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, soul, and mind, and love your neighbor as you love yourself." The apostle Paul said to the early church that faith, hope, and love abide, but the greatest of these is love (1 Corinthians 13:13). As the popular *Beatles* song puts it, love really is all we need, or at least God's love is all we need. That Divine love is freely given by God, and we need it in our hearts and our understandings as we journey through this world. 450 years after the crafting of the *Heidelberg Catechism*—a document created in order to bring about religious peace—the church has received a call to a new time of revision and reflection. Just as the Lutherans, Zwinglians, and the Calvinists of long ago sought to find common ground on which to move forward, so now the Reformed church of yesterday and the Reformed church of today are meeting to forge a new way into the future with a clear understanding of God's continuing revelation to us through Scripture. And as it was modeled for us in Christ, we must continue to share with our neighbors the same extravagant love and unconditional grace that we have been given through Jesus. Through a revised language of divine love, extrapolated from themes in the *Heidelberg Catechism*, the Reformed church of today can pave the way for the peace and reconciliation that our world longs for.

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