

The Heidelberg Catechism

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Visit www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/curriculum/being-reformed/ to download and read the new translation of the Heidelberg Catechism.

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Introduction to *Being Reformed: Faith Seeking Understanding*

Reformed and Presbyterian Christians are people of faith who are seeking understanding. From the beginnings of our Reformed tradition, Presbyterians have realized God calls us to explore ways the Christian faith can be more fully known and expressed. This vision has driven concerns for the education of people of all ages. Presbyterians have been big on providing resources to help us delve more deeply into Christian faith and the theology that gives our living tradition its distinctive heritage.

This *Being Reformed* curriculum for adults is one expression of the desire to open up what it means to be Presbyterian Christians in the world today. Our purpose is to enhance, enrich, and expand our insights. We want Presbyterians to grow in understandings of elements that are foundational and significant for their faith. Encounters with theology, church, worship, spirituality/discipleship, and social righteousness will guide our ways.

These studies engage our whole selves. We will find our minds moved by new ideas, our emotions stirred with responses of gratitude, and calls for action that can lead us in different life directions. Heads, hearts, and hands will be drawn into the joys of discovering what new things God is calling us toward.

We invite you to join this journey of faith seeking understanding. Celebrate the blessings of our Reformed and Presbyterian tradition of faith. Be stimulated and challenged by fresh insights that will deepen your understandings. Find a stronger commitment to the God who has loved us in Jesus Christ.

To the Leader

The authors of *Being Reformed: Faith Seeking Understanding* emphasize essential Reformed theological principles that relate to our lives of faith. These sessions will help you lead a group into the theology and thoughts inspired by the challenging and interesting articles in the participant's book.

You might choose simply to begin the session with the prayer that precedes each session in the participant's book, then reading through the articles together, stopping when you or a student wishes to comment or raise a question. You could then close the session by discussing the questions at the end of the session and encouraging the group members to do the spiritual practice.

Unfortunately, that style of leading does not meet the needs of every kind of learner. The session plans encourage group leaders to try some new things to light up the hearts and minds of more people. Most teachers teach the way they like to learn. Choosing one new activity during each session will stretch you and open a door to someone who learns differently than you. Over the weeks, you will notice what your group enjoys and what they are unwilling to do. Let that, rather than your preferences, be your guide as you prepare to lead.

These session plans are designed to encourage group participation. Discussion and sharing create community and provide practice that all of us need in expressing our faith and wrestling with our questions. When asking questions, get comfortable with some silence while group members contemplate a response. Resist the urge to fill up the silence with your words.

If your group members like to talk, you might not be able to ask every suggested question. Also it will make a difference in your group session if group members have read the articles prior to the session. If you find it necessary to read from the participant's book during the group session, choose the passages that convey the core ideas.

You are more than a dispenser of information. In your role as group leader, you cooperate with God in the formation of faith and in the transformation of lives. You are the lead learner, modeling a way that faith seeks understanding. You are not trying to cover a lesson, but to uncover truth. Pray for yourself and your group members, prepare your session, relax, and enjoy!

May God bless your faithfulness!

Our Comfort, Then Our Misery (Q. 1–11)

Scripture

1 Corinthians 6:19; Romans 8:7

Main Idea

The Heidelberg Catechism establishes the good news of belonging to God in Jesus Christ and its comfort before acknowledging the problem of human sin. We are not to wallow in guilt; our guilt helps us recognize the grace that embraces us already.

Teaching Points

This session invites participants to:

1. Consider how a catechism might help a faith community grow in their faith.
2. Reflect on the nature of sin and its effect on their lives.
3. Discuss the life to which they are called to live as followers of Jesus Christ.

Resources Needed

Bibles

Participant's books

Copies of the new translation of the Heidelberg Catechism

Index cards

Pens

Newsprint

Marker

Leader Prep

As you prepare to lead this session, the most important thing to do is to read the new translation of the Heidelberg Catechism and engage in some conversation with others about the ideas you find there. It will also be useful to look up some of the biblical passages cited in the notes. This study will give background, clarify problematic issues, and translate sixteenth-century concepts

for today's Christians. However, the point is to deepen your engagement with the catechism itself.

Keep in mind three key concepts for digging into the catechism: the personal nature of the catechism, comfort, and misery.

The personal nature of the catechism. The word *catechism* can sound off-putting. We tend to think of catechisms as rote memorizations of religious questions and correct answers. However, they were written to provide a personal conversation between the most pressing human anxieties and the biblical story. Notice how often the catechism says *your* and *my*, but not *ours*. This is an intensely personal catechism.

Comfort. When the catechism speaks of comfort, it implies strength. The catechism invites us to find strength in the redemption of Jesus Christ. Question 1 says that “not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven.” This doesn't mean that God is responsible for our profound losses in life. It means that God carefully watches over us. Furthermore, the catechism goes on to claim (based on Romans 8:28) that because God is involved, “all things must work together for my salvation.”

Misery. Questions 2–11 introduce the problem of sin and its consequence, our misery. Note that the catechism speaks of “sin,” not “sins.” Sin is best understood as a state of brokenness and the consequence is separation from God; hence, our misery. The catechism reminds us that we confess our sin not to wallow in our guilt, but to discover the comfort of how we are set free from it.

For this study, each participant will need to have a copy of the revised translation of the Heidelberg Catechism. Go to presbyterianmission.org/ministries/curriculum/being-reformed/ to download a free copy.

Leading the Session

Gather

- Give each participant an index card and a pen. Have participants write a question about God or their faith. Collect, shuffle, and redistribute the cards. Have participants write a short answer to the question on the card.
- Collect the cards. Read the questions and answers out loud. Ask: *How did it feel to pose and answer a faith question? How might a catechism help a faith community grow in their faith? What challenges are inherent in creating a catechism?*
- Pray the prayer in the participant's book.

Head

- In summarizing the three sections of the catechism, Dr. Hansen writes, “If anybody ever asks what Christians believe, you could hardly do better than ‘Misery due to sin, deliverance by Jesus Christ, and a life of gratitude toward God.’”
- Ask: *How does this summary of the catechism reflect the foundation of the Christian faith?*
- Ask: *As Dr. Hansen proposes in the preface, how do the Scripture passages noted throughout the catechism prompt a dialogue instead of being proof texts?*
- Read together Question 1 of the catechism. Ask: *What does it mean to belong to Jesus Christ?*
- Read together 1 Corinthians 6:19. Ask: *How does this verse connect with Question 1 of the catechism?*

Heart

- Ask: *What is comforting about your faith? How does your answer to this question resonate with Question 1 in the catechism?*
- Ask: *What is sin?*
- Read together Questions 5 and 6 of the catechism. Ask: *What does it mean to hate God and neighbor? What does it mean in Question 7 that we are “conceived and born in a sinful condition”?*
- Ask: *According to Dr. Hansen, what two problems does sin create? How do these problems affect our lives?*
- Dr. Hansen writes: “When the Heidelberg Catechism moves to the topic of sin, many readers are taken aback. We work hard to maintain positive self-esteem, assuring ourselves that we are good people. We treat guilt as a psychological problem, not our true spiritual state.”
- Ask: *How has studying Part 1 of the catechism affected your understanding of sin?*

Hands

- Read together Romans 8:7.
- Ask: *How does the catechism present the misery of sin as our damaged nature? How does our damaged nature prevent us from living as God desires for us to live?*
- Dr. Hansen writes: “Today, as in 1563, Christians feel deeply the benefit that comes through the work of Christ, whose sacrifice brings us forgiveness. Comforting too is the fact that God lovingly guides our lives and shapes the things that happen so we come to salvation and live the Christian life. This changes us in ways subtle and profound and we begin to want to please God.”
- Ask: *How has your life been changed through the work of Christ? How do these changes lead you to wanting to please God?*
- Dr. Hansen writes, “There is a clear sense that God has expectations of us, and that conditions are attached to living life in Christ.”
- Ask: *What conditions are attached to living a life in Christ? How does your life reflect Christ’s love? What changes can you make in order for your life to reflect more of Christ’s love?*

Depart

- Form pairs of participants. Have pairs create a short statement that summarizes Questions 1–11 of the catechism.
- Write *Questions 1–11* at the top of a posted sheet of newsprint. Give pairs an opportunity to say their summary statement to the rest of the group. Record the summary statements on the newsprint.
- Close in prayer.
- Save the newsprint for future sessions.

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Our Comfort, Then Our Misery

(Q. 1–11)

Scripture

1 Corinthians 6:19 The famous opening of the Heidelberg Catechism bases our “comfort” in the fact that we belong to Christ, rather than to ourselves.

Romans 8:7 The catechism presents the misery of sin as our damaged nature, which can no longer live as God intends us to live.

Hebrews 9:27 The catechism presents the second consequence of sin—guilt before God our just judge.

Prayer

Loving God, be with us and guide us as we study the Heidelberg Catechism. Guide us to deeper understanding of our own faith by helping us understand this document. Help us to bring our experience and knowledge into conversation with the countless millions of Christians who have used and loved this catechism. Give us a richer understanding of what you have taught in your Word, that we may know with full assurance that in life and death we belong to our faithful Savior. Amen.

Introduction

As we begin, let’s look at how the Heidelberg Catechism is organized. Actually, it has several different patterns. The first, and most obvious, is the question-and-answer format. This makes the whole document flow as a conversation, with each answer prompting the next question. It is also a teaching device. A minister could have members of a class memorize the answers section by section. This would be the beginning, not the end of the process. By memorizing the catechism’s answer, you wrap your mind around one way to deal with a topic. Then you know the catechism’s answer well enough that you can engage in discussion on it, whether you agree with it or not. You can also begin to put it to the test as an interpretation of Scripture, looking up the texts in the notes and thinking of other relevant passages.

Second, and a somewhat later addition, is the division of the catechism into fifty-two “Lord’s Days.” This is another teaching device: in weekly increments the whole catechism can be taught over the course of a year. In the Dutch Reformed tradition, the week’s section of the catechism was the focus of the sermon in the Sunday evening service. Year after year, the congregation thought through the basic teachings of the faith, making for a well-rounded Christian education.

Third and most important, it is divided into a brief introduction and three main sections. The first is “Misery” or the human problem caused by sin. Second is “Deliverance” or God’s solution to that problem through Jesus Christ. The third is “Gratitude” or the life we live once Jesus delivers us. That three-part structure is a useful thing in itself. If anybody ever asks what Christians believe, you could hardly do better than “Misery due to sin, deliverance by Jesus Christ, and a life of gratitude toward God.” Some make the catechism’s three parts even catchier, calling them “guilt, grace, and gratitude.” The introduction and the section on misery are so short that we will deal with them both in this first session.

“You are not your own”

“What is your only comfort in life and in death?” This much-beloved first question sets the catechism’s tone. This is not going to be a dry discussion of abstract ideas. Topic by topic the Heidelberg Catechism will deal with things that matter for our lives. Listen for the personal emphasis as you read along, as when the catechism considers how the teachings of the Apostles’ Creed “help” and “benefit” us.

When I asked a group of church officers what they found comforting about their faith, many of the top answers sounded a lot like the first question of the Heidelberg Catechism. Today, as in 1563, Christians feel deeply the benefit that comes through the work of Christ, whose sacrifice brings us forgiveness. Comforting too is the fact that God lovingly guides our lives and shapes the things that happen so we come to salvation and live the Christian life. This changes us in ways subtle and profound and we begin to want to please God.

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not to ourselves. We have actually lost our own claim to our lives. This idea is so opposite to our culture's priorities on autonomy and individual freedom that it is almost surprising we find it comforting!

Modern readers can stumble on the assertion that God guides all the events of life, even the painful ones. The catechism is not trying to claim that the bad things that happen are actually good, nor that God is cruel toward us. Rather, the authors want us to see God's loving hand working eternal good behind the scenes of both joy and pain. Without using the problematic word *predestination*, this question asserts traditional Reformed teachings, showing God as the source of our salvation and as the Lord of history. It is also echoing words of Jesus and Paul, as notes seven and eight show.

The second question points ahead to the outline of the catechism, which summarizes the whole of biblical faith. We need to know three things to live into the comfort our faith promises. First, briefly, we need to know our misery due to sin. Second, much more expansively, we need to know how Christ delivers us from that misery. Third, once we are freed, we need to know how to live in gratitude to God for this amazing gift. That structure is, in itself, one of the catechism's gifts to us. If you find it hard to articulate what you believe, here is a manageable summary of the Christian life: in Christ we move from guilt, through grace, to gratitude. Notice it does not ask what we need to know in order to be saved. As we will see later, faith is not primarily a matter of agreeing with points of doctrine. Faith is wholehearted trust in God. So, not *to have* faith, but *because* we have faith, we need to know these things.

“The mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God”

When the Heidelberg Catechism moves to the topic of sin, many readers are taken aback. We work hard to maintain positive self-esteem, assuring ourselves that we are good people. We treat guilt as a psychological problem, not our true spiritual state. Some churches have even given up the prayer of confession in their worship services. Listen to what we say when someone apologizes—“Don't worry about it! It's no problem!” We deny the sin instead of offering forgiveness. If this section seems too negative, the catechism says “Keep reading!” This is by far the shortest of the three main sections, but it is necessary. Sin is the problem Jesus came to solve. Lest readers despair at the problem, the catechism makes it a sort of misery sandwich, a thin slice of sin between rich slices of bread: comfort and deliverance.

According to the catechism, sin creates two problems, and both leave us miserable. First, sin damages our nature. After summarizing God's law in the command to love our neighbor, Question 5 asks us if we are able to do this

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“perfectly.” The response is a plaintive *no*. We may love God, but the commandment calls us to love with all our heart, all our soul, and all our mind. Much of our attention and affection are often given to other things. We may love our neighbors, at least some of them, some of the time. Loving them all as we love ourselves, with the pure desire to seek their best, is another matter. Only perfection meets the standard, and anything less (which is everything we do) amounts to sin. The answer goes much further than many are comfortable with, having us say we actually “hate God and my neighbor.” The catechism is not trying to articulate our personal views of ourselves. It is trying to form our views according to biblical teaching, as the passages they cite will show (Romans 8:7; Ephesians 2:3).

The catechism is clear that this is not how God created us. Our inability to obey is brokenness, and the catechism attributes the damage to Adam and Eve. Whether one believes in a historical Eden or not, Genesis provides a biblical way to talk about God's good creation and the problems created by bad human choices. Question 9 says they “robbed themselves” of the ability to keep God's law, supporting this with one of the catechism's most surprising biblical citations: the Good Samaritan in Luke 10. This parable, you might note, says nothing about the fall or damaged free will. However, in the early church, in the Middle Ages, and even in Martin Luther's preaching, the one beaten and robbed was understood as humanity. In the fall, we were left, as the parable says, “half dead” and what was stolen was our ability to live as God commands. Christ is the Good Samaritan who rescued us and restored our ability. Here and in many other cases, the biblical citations are not proof texts; they bring faith into rich conversation with the Bible.

“And after that the judgment”

Since today free will is a core value, the theological idea that we have lost the ability to obey God has fallen on hard times. We think we

have the ability to obey God perfectly, despite the annoying fact that we do not actually do it. The catechism's second source of our misery has fared no better, and this too is a matter of biblical teaching.

This second source of misery is that sin has changed our legal status before God. This is at least hinted at in the beginning of the section when the catechism says we know our misery by contrasting our lives with God's law. The metaphorical picture is that we are felons standing before our judge. God made fair laws; we broke them; we stand condemned. It is no excuse, according to the catechism, that we have lost the ability to obey perfectly. God created us fully able—we human beings messed up our own abilities by disobeying. We who are reading the catechism did not start the problem ourselves, but our first parents did, and we all inherit the consequences.

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Here again we have a counter-cultural point. Few feel it is fair or just to condemn one person for something another person did. However, the idea is certainly not foreign to Scripture, or to Western theology since Augustine in the fifth century. In Question 11, when the catechism asserts that God is just to punish sin, notice that it cites Exodus 20:5, from the Ten Commandments, which includes the statement that “I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me.” Moreover, whoever caused the original problem, we shoulder the blame for all the sinning we ourselves do.

Troubling as well is the catechism's portrait of God as “terribly angry” and a “just judge,” ready to punish harshly. It might help to note that the catechism shows God angry with sin, rather than with the people who do the sinning—but maybe that will not help enough, since clearly the people receive the punishment. It is quite common for Christians to think that since, as Scripture puts it, God is love, wrath is out of the question. If we expect the Heidelberg Catechism to attribute to God the very modern psychological concept of unconditional love, we will be disappointed. Rather, the catechism will assert that God loves so much that forgiveness is readily available. However, there is a clear sense that God has expectations

of us, and that conditions are attached to living life in Christ. The Scripture citations invite us to begin exploring this issue as a biblical theme. The things to note in the text of the catechism, however, are the beautiful picture of the life God created us for before sin (Question 6) and the remarkable promise of redemption in Christ that fills the next, much larger section.

Spiritual Practice

Take twenty or thirty minutes with your journal or some blank paper and write about your past or present experience with themes from this session's portion of the catechism. What in your faith provides comfort? What helps you to feel you belong to Christ? What feels like misery?

Questions for Reflection

How does your own experience of the faith feel similar to or different from the comfort described in the opening question?

As you think about the world around us, which of the Heidelberg Catechism's descriptions of misery, or the consequences of sin, seems most realistic? Explain.

Look up three of the biblical citations from the notes to Questions 1–11. Discuss whether each one seems to clearly support the relevant lines of the catechism and, if any seem like a stretch, see if you can figure out why the passages were cited.