

# Our Only Comfort

52 Reflections on the Heidelberg Catechism

*Neal D. Presa*

**WJK** WESTMINSTER  
JOHN KNOX PRESS  
LOUISVILLE • KENTUCKY

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Foreword © 2015 Westminster John Knox Press

*First edition*  
Published by Westminster John Knox Press  
Louisville, Kentucky

15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24—10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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*Book design by Sharon Adams*  
*Cover design by Dilu Nicholas*

#### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Presa, Neal D.

Our only comfort: 52 reflections on the Heidelberg Catechism / Neal D. Presa.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-664-26069-9 (alk. paper)

1. Heidelberg Katechismus. I. Title.

BX9428.P74 2015

238'.42—dc23

2014035969

∞ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of the American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1992.

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## Foreword

*T*he word “catechism” does not typically make people break out in warm smiles. It sounds like a tedious exercise in learning the prescribed answers to old questions nobody really cares about. But this was not the intent of the writers of the Heidelberg Catechism. They were trying to do something very different—maintaining our holy conversation with the God who is passionate for us.

Along the way in the conversation the Catechism doesn’t just teach; more importantly it spiritually forms us by pressing questions that pierce the most protected corners of our hearts. And then it suggests the most thoughtful responses the church has found.

The Catechism’s rhythm of questions and responses, not answers, gives the reader a sense of being in dialogue with this One who is always abounding in grace, even when offering the law. Or it unfolds the depth of God’s mercy that is found in saying the Apostles’ Creed or the Lord’s Prayer. As one reads through the Catechism it soon becomes clear that the focus is on a God who really knows us, even our sin, but who has determined to redeem us in love. It is almost as if all the questions of the Catechism are really asking God, “Really? You still want to offer us the comfort of salvation?” And the response is always, “Yes, because that is how grace works.” This is a great conversation.

The architecture of the Heidelberg Catechism organizes this sacred conversation around fifty-two weeks. The expectation of its authors, Zacharias Ursinus and Caspar Olevianus, a scholar and a pastor, was not that it would be used to form another orthodoxy. Instead, their goal was to shape the souls of those who invoked it as a spiritual discipline through weekly worship. For over 450 years, it has done exactly that.

Dr. Neal Presa clearly understands this mission of the Heidelberg Catechism. His book has no interest in polemical arguing about the superiority

of Reformed theological convictions. Instead, like the Catechism itself, he is just whispering in the ear of anyone who is interested in looking into the deepest questions of life. This book could have been written only by a pastor who has paid attention to the lives of his parishioners, as well as his own, and who has a trained eye for the subtext of yearning we find in culture.

All good conversations take time to listen to everyone in the room. When you read this book you discover that you are in the room, and so is the Catechism, and so is the Holy Spirit who is using this holy conversation to bind you deeper into the Son's beloved relationship with the Father. So I encourage you to read this book slowly, perhaps in fifty-two increments, and allow the sacred conversation to continue in your own heart between the readings.

When theology is done well, it realizes that its true mission is to nurture our understanding of what it means to live in Christ. When pastoral ministry is done well, it has the exact same purpose. Thus, here we have an extraordinarily pastoral catechism that is being presented by an extraordinarily capable pastor, both with the same goal—guiding the reader deeper into the discovery of what it means to be fully alive in Christ.

Also, it is significant that Dr. Presa wrote this book after completing a two-year term in which he served as the Moderator of the 220th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). In this capacity he traveled more miles than even he knows around the world listening to Christians from many different traditions of our one common faith in Jesus Christ. This comes through in his writing. And perhaps it is one of the reasons he chose to write about the Heidelberg.

When Ursinus and Olevianus were asked by Frederick III to write the Catechism, it was because the people of Palentate, Germany, were torn between Lutheran and Reformed convictions. The original purpose of the Heidelberg was to create an affirmation of faith that could hold together Protestants with different theologies. It achieves this goal by its deep commitment to pastoral theology.

Dr. Presa is an ecumenical statesman who stands in the great Heidelberg tradition of finding a way to keep people of many diverse Christian traditions engaged in the same holy conversation with our only comfort in life and death. So it doesn't really matter what Christian tradition has formed you, or even if you have no tradition of faith, you will be blessed by following these reflections on what it means to belong to a faithful savior named Jesus Christ.

M. Craig Barnes  
President, Princeton Theological Seminary

# Introduction

*T*he Reformed theological tradition is a confessional one. We confess what we believe about God, ourselves, and the world. Such confession is written, taught, read, sung, prayed, and tweeted. The power of confession is that it anchors us to a common faith which belongs to a community of followers of Jesus Christ, a sojourning fellowship that seeks in every generation to be faithful to the self-giving, self-revealing triune God.

In 2013, Reformed churches celebrated the 450th anniversary of the Heidelberg Catechism. This theological treasure is arguably the most translated and the most used in the constellation of confessional documents that Reformed communities have developed over the five centuries since the sixteenth-century Reformation. It is a beloved catechism in that it succinctly teaches the Reformed faith within the framework of the ancient “rule of faith”: the Apostles’ Creed, the Ten Commandments, and the Lord’s Prayer. Its salutary benefit enriches our life and faith in apprenticing us to the gospel of Jesus Christ (the Creed); the ethics of God’s kingdom and the ways of God’s own character and heart (the Ten Commandments); and the language of love (the Lord’s Prayer). I have used it in my home and family, in personal devotions, and in corporate worship.

The Heidelberg Catechism (1563) was grouped into fifty-two Lord’s Day sections, signaling the intention of the Palatinate authors that this be used in weekly worship of the Church. When I had the privilege of serving as both the Chair of the PC(USA) General Assembly Special Committee on the Heidelberg Catechism and, subsequently, as Moderator of the 220th General Assembly (2012) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), I undertook the devotional practice of offering pastoral, theological reflections on the fifty-two sections through blog posts as a way to be a resource to congregations, pastors, and worship planners to use the Catechism in worship. This book is the

culmination of that project, with added prayers to accompany the particular theological themes of each catechetical section.

I am grateful for the diligent work of the Special Committee as we partnered with the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA) and the Reformed Church of America (RCA) in developing a common translation of the Catechism that is now shared among our three communions; this is a remarkable ecumenical feat.

The common translation that we in the PC(USA) will now have in our *Book of Confessions* also has updated scriptural references that were in the various 1563 German and Latin versions of the Catechism. (Scripture citations in **boldface** were not in the 1563 German edition but were added in the 1563 Latin edition. Citations in *italics* were in the German edition but were omitted from the Latin edition. Square brackets [] indicate the Special Committee's corrections of typographical errors in the 1563 texts and clarifications.) May these accompanying references deepen our engagement with both God's Word and the Catechism as we give careful consideration and prayerful study to the three main themes of the Catechism: guilt, grace, and gratitude.

My thanks go to my colleagues on the General Assembly Special Committee on the Heidelberg Catechism, our partners in the CRCNA and RCA, and the Office of the General Assembly. I am deeply grateful to Westminster John Knox Press for publishing this volume, most notably David Dobson, vice president and executive director of publishing, for accepting and guiding this project. Last and certainly not least, thanks to my wife, Grace, and sons, Daniel and Andrew; Grace was stalwart in reading these reflections and posting them on my blog post during our moderatorial journey.

My sons, Daniel and Andrew, have been patient with me on this project. I am continually delighted in their growth in the faith as God has guided them and our parenting. The Catechism was to apprentice a present-future generation in the faith. Every day I am thankful to God to teach them what it means to find their comfort, in life and in death, in body and in soul, that Jesus Christ is their faithful Savior and Lord. To them and for them, I dedicate this book.



# Lord's Day 1

## Questions and Answers 1–2

### 1 Q. What is your only comfort in life and in death?

A. That I am not my own,<sup>1</sup>  
but belong—  
body and soul,  
in life and in death—<sup>2</sup>  
to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.<sup>3</sup>

He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood,<sup>4</sup>  
and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil.<sup>5</sup>  
He also watches over me in such a way<sup>6</sup>  
that not a hair can fall from my head  
without the will of my Father in heaven;<sup>7</sup>  
in fact, all things must work together for my salvation.<sup>8</sup>

Because I belong to him,  
Christ, by his Holy Spirit,  
assures me of eternal life<sup>9</sup>  
and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready  
from now on to live for him.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>1</sup>1 Cor. 6:19

<sup>2</sup>Rom. 14:8

<sup>3</sup>1 Cor. 3:23

<sup>4</sup>1 Pet. 1:18; 1 John 1:7; 2:2

<sup>5</sup>1 John 3:8

<sup>6</sup>John 6:39

<sup>7</sup>Matt. 10:30; Luke 21:18

<sup>8</sup>Rom. 8:28

<sup>9</sup>2 Cor. 1:22; 5:5; Eph. 1:14; Rom. 8:16

<sup>10</sup>Rom. 8:14

2 Lord's Day 1

2 **Q. What must you know to live and die in the joy of this comfort?**

A. Three things:<sup>1</sup>

first, how great my sin and misery are;<sup>2</sup>

second, how I am set free from all my sins and misery;<sup>3</sup>

third, how I am to thank God for such deliverance.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Luke 24:47; 1 Cor. 6:11; Titus 3:3

<sup>2</sup>**John 9:41**; John 15:[6–]7

<sup>3</sup>John 17:3

<sup>4</sup>Eph. 5:10

## The Heart of the Matter

There's a popular theory that in times of wild economic consumption zombie movies and television shows make a comeback and in times of economic desperation vampires are the preferred genre. In both cases, there's a numbing effect on the soul, a bloodletting and a blood thirsting, the sucking away of life and vitality. One thing zombies and vampires don't have is a heart.

In his book *Waiting for Gospel*, Douglas John Hall cites the theologian Paul Tillich, who discussed the three combination anxieties that all human beings face: (1) fate, destiny, and where I will go when I die; (2) shame, condemnation; and (3) meaningfulness and purposefulness. Hall suggests that even as the gospel offers the antidote to the fears and anxieties of each and all of those categories, we as twenty-first-century people need the Good News of God to counter number 3. To put it in a question, it's not so much anxiety over "Where will I go when I die?" as it is more about "What is the point of life and living?" "What is the heart of the matter of our life?"

It is very possible to live our lives as the walking dead—eating, voting, teaching—but not truly and fully alive in God. St. Irenaeus once remarked, "The glory of God is man fully alive."

Yet, we can get stuck in the mire of what we call life, going from point A to point B, in pursuit of people, places, and things . . . going through the grind of work, family, social responsibility, with Church or faith as but one among many activities or venues or compartments of our lives. It's a life of the walking dead . . . without passion, without soul.

The Catechism in these first two sections speaks to us in comprehensive terms—body and soul, life and death, and everything in between. This is cradle to grave and the life thereafter. The triune God claims us as God's own; God has a right to. God has the right to insist, to intrude, to instill in us

the knowledge and love of God because apart from God we can do nothing and are nothing; the opposite is true, as Scriptures testify, in and with God, “we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). God knows us best, as our Maker, and when we go on our self-destructive ways, thinking life is about us, or we are about ourselves, God as our loving Father in heaven sees the hurt we inflict on our souls, the hurt we inflict on others, and puts a stop to it so that we may live more fully alive for what God has in store for us.

The Scripture passages appended to Q/A 1 are replete with language of belongingness, or possession . . . God possesses us, and because God possesses us, holds us, we forever belong to God. The Tempter, evil spirits, death itself, and every element that contradicts our life in God—all of this has no right to intrude on us. God saves us fully, finally, in Jesus Christ, with the seal of the Holy Spirit to enable and empower us to live in, with, and for God. God declares to all these powers, principalities—no! And to us, God says—yes! You belong to Me. I am yours, and you are Mine.

Eberhard Busch summarizes what is at stake in Q/A 2. We need this comfort because we are in misery. God gives us this comfort in Christ by redeeming us. This comfort has the effect of our commitment to live lives of gratitude to God.

The misery comes in living as the walking dead, a life apart from God, a life not in touch with God’s desire for our lives and the world; a life that breaks the heart of our heavenly Father for what we were created to be.

Luther and Ursinus compared us to a sick patient: we need to recognize our diseased state and the source of our medicine, and be given the desire for that medicine. In the recognition of the illness and the cure, and in the receiving of the antidote, we are filled with joy and thankfulness. This recognition we learn from the Ten Commandments as the Decalogue teaches us the heart of God. The medicinal source we learn from the Creed, which summarizes the Good News of the triune God, the One who is the way, the truth, and the life. The Lord’s Prayer, which Jesus Christ joins us in praying to the Father and which the Spirit of Christ enables us to pray, keeps our lives continually pulsing after the heartbeat of God.

### Prayer

Lord, You delight in me through Your Son, Jesus Christ. Anchor me to Your heart, that I may always delight in Your will and in Your ways. In body and in soul, in life and in death, I belong to You. For that, I am grateful. Amen.

# Lord's Day 2

## Questions and Answers 3–5

**3 Q. How do you come to know your misery?**

**A.** The law of God tells me.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Rom. 3:20

**4 Q. What does God's law require of us?**

**A.** Christ teaches us this in summary in Matthew 22:37–40:

“‘You shall love the Lord your God  
with all your heart,  
and with all your soul,  
and with all your mind.’  
This is the greatest and first commandment.

“And a second is like it:  
‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’

“On these two commandments hang  
all the law and the prophets.”

**5 Q. Can you live up to all this perfectly?**

**A.** No.<sup>1</sup>

I have a natural tendency  
to hate God and my neighbor.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Rom. 3:10; 3:23; 1 John 1:8

<sup>2</sup>Rom. 8:7; Eph. 2:3

## Mirror, Mirror

Whenever I travel, I carry in my briefcase a framed drawing that my eldest son gave to me one Father’s Day depicting him and me holding each other’s hands. Within this frame, I placed photos of both of my sons and four trading cards they gave to me from their prized Pokemon cards. This frame of mementos, together with a card from my wife that remains in my carrying case, accompanies me in hotels, meeting halls, church sanctuaries, meetings, countless airports, and rental cars. These objects speak to me when I can’t FaceTime or Skype with my family; they tether me to home when things feel miserable.

Eberhard Busch reminds us that the German word translated “misery” is *Elend*, which shares the etymology for the word *Ausland*, or “foreign land.” In *Drawn to Freedom*, Busch observes in this connection:

Sin means living far away from the place where I really belong, far from home, far from relationships without which I cannot really be myself—so far that I cannot find the way out of the foreign land by myself, so far that I finally may no longer even want to get out. . . . If there is a misery, then it is precisely this: our life, instead of being lived from God and with God, circles around ourselves, pulsates within ourselves, makes us the midpoint of all things—a life in which we belong to ourselves and want to make as much as possible belong to us. (p. 64)

(I commend Craig Barnes’s excellent discussion of this in his volume *Searching for Home*.)

Being distant from our home that is in and with God’s heart can be seen in acts of greed and covetousness, blind ambition, or a restless heart that seeks self as the priority—my agenda, my plans, my priorities, or a scene from our town’s Little League competition two weeks ago of two parent coaches on opposing teams displaying machismo with bouts of name calling; globalize this human heart impulse and we see the ideologically driven atrocities devastating Syria. Microcosmic or macrocosmic. Houston, we have a problem. Or can we even recognize it, have the courage to name it before our gracious God who desires for us to be free to love, and repent of it?

The Catechism’s questions 3 through 5 are described by commentators as picking up on the Lutheran distinction between law and gospel, with a nuancing from the Reformed faith in placing the discussion on misery within Christ’s summary of the law, which is to love. The law was described by the Reformers as having three uses: to restrain evil, to teach that we can’t keep

the law and direct us toward mercy and grace, and to describe a norm of conduct for followers of Jesus Christ.

The law acts as a mirror that speaks to our hearts and minds. But the law in and of itself doesn't speak; the law is not an entity, but the very extension and expression of the heart of God. Far from being abstract, impersonal, stony prescriptions and prohibitions, the law of God is described by the psalmist as "reviving the soul"; "clear, enlightening the eyes"; "pure, enduring forever"; "true and righteous altogether" (Ps. 19:7–9). The psalmist then describes the law as "more to be desired . . . than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb" (v. 10).

While the law in human hands has a tendency to be hard, unbendable, unyielding, and merciless, in the hands of God and on the lips of our dear Lord Christ the law is life-giving, sweet, savory, and salutary to our lives and all those around us.

Why?

The law of God emanates from the very heart of God. Pick any commandment of the Decalogue. The commandment to speak the truth and not lie comes from the God who is truth and does not lie. The commandment to not commit adultery comes from the God who is singularly focused on the triune God's perfect love in community among Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and God's own determined love for the world that God created.

When the law speaks to us, it is God reaching out to us, opening God's heart to us. The misery comes when we are confronted with such an awesome and radical love that impinges on and threatens our acts of pride, self-preservation, and self-enthronement.

It's in that confrontation that the law of God—God's heart, or more accurately, God's very self—shows us that we are miserable without God, living in a foreign land, away from our proper home, which is nestled in the heart of God.

On life's journey through foreign lands, our home away from home is that traveling frame, those mementos and portraits of the family story, what Q/A 4 describes in quoting Christ as "On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

When you read any of God's laws, and certainly the summary of them in the two greatest commandments, what would it mean to regard them as God's personal words to you for the journey, glimpses into the heart-soul-mind of the Lord who is your home? The Lord who desires your wandering heart-soul-mind back where you belong.

## Prayer

Loving Lord, “I treasure your word in my heart, so that I may not sin against you” (Ps. 119:11). Marinate my heart and soul with Your holy word, Your commandments, Your statutes, and Your ordinances, that I may follow Your way of righteousness that leads to life. Your word is indeed more savory than the finest honey, more precious than gold or silver, for Your word is from Your heart, and in Your heart is my home. Amen.

# Lord's Day 3

## Questions and Answers 6–8

**6 Q. Did God create people so wicked and perverse?**

**A.** No.<sup>1</sup>

God created them good and in his own image,<sup>2</sup>  
that is, in true righteousness and holiness,  
so that they might  
truly know God their creator,  
love him with all their heart,  
and live with God in eternal happiness,  
to praise and glorify him.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Gen. 1:31

<sup>2</sup>Gen. 1:26–27

<sup>3</sup>2 Cor. 3:18; Col. 3:10; Eph. 4:24

**7 Q. Then where does this corrupt human nature come from?**

**A.** The fall and disobedience of our first parents,  
Adam and Eve, in Paradise.<sup>1</sup>

This fall has so poisoned our nature  
that we are all conceived and born  
in a sinful condition.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Gen. 3; Rom. 5:12, 18–19

<sup>2</sup>Ps. 51:5; **Gen. 5:3**

**8 Q. But are we so corrupt that we are totally unable to do any good and inclined toward all evil?**



- A. Yes,<sup>1</sup> unless we are born again  
by the Spirit of God.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>John 3:6; **Gen. 6:5**; Job 14:4; 15:16, [35]; Isa. 53:6

<sup>2</sup>John 3:5

### Our Common Lot

Sociologist James Davison Hunter of the University of Virginia, in his *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World*, describes how both political conservatives and political progressives in the United States have sought to advance and advocate their particular visions and agendas for the country—albeit divergent views—but both have followed the same methods. Hunter persuasively argues that both sides have sought and prayed for control over the levers of power and authority—the White House, the U.S. Congress, the Supreme Court, state-houses, and governorships—in order to enact legislation or increase the likelihood of judicial rulings that advance a particular vision. In both cases, Hunter believes that neither side’s vision and agenda has won the day. Why? Because hearts and minds are not changed by legislation, resolution, or judicial pronouncements. Hunter doesn’t advocate for the discarding of laws nor giving up on the legislative and judicial processes; each and all have their proper place in our common life together as a country and as a society. What he does call for is something simple but radically different: “faithful presence.”

Faithful presence is being in solidarity with your neighbor, intentionally listening, engaging in face-to-face/heart-to-heart conversation, serving one another. Faithful presence requires an intentionality that is more durable and enduring than the outcome of the next election or the ruling of a nine-member court, or even what a General Assembly might or might not do. Faithful presence is about being in solidarity with one another. It’s a far more excellent way, and it is much more difficult because it’s often not public, the results are not immediate, there’s little speech making or voting, and it requires the investment of your time, energy, and prayer. But more importantly, faithful presence requires the very work of God on our lives to prompt, prod, and renovate our heart and mind so that we regard both God and our neighbor as the very gifts that make our hearts and souls delight with gratitude and joy.

Q/A 6–8 is a Lord's Day section focused on being in solidarity with our common lot. Q/A 6 speaks to us about God's intention in bringing us into the world, in creating the world in the first place. Every part of creation, including you and me, is here to glorify God, to reflect the image of God, to enjoy God. The common lot that we all share with one another as human beings and that we all share with the entire created order is in recognizing the Lord God Almighty as our Creator and, in doing so, enjoying God and offering our lives in deep gratitude for life itself; but more so, in giving thanks to God simply because God . . . is God. Period. Faithful presence is being in solidarity with one another and with creation in recognizing our common calling, our common purpose, and our common lot in belonging to this God who has revealed God's self to be the holy, righteous, good and gracious, all-wise, all-loving God who brought us and everything into being.

Q/A 7 speaks to us of our common lot with Adam and Eve and with one another. This is not so much about an inheritance of a seed that was in Adam and Eve, nor is this so much about the origin of sin. Eberhard Busch astutely observes, "Sin comes from sin." In observing a murderer, our nature wants to inflict vengeance. Busch says of a recognition of our common lot in sin: "But if I know what basic sin is, I will say, in a shaking voice: the roots that in him[her] have borne such terrible fruit lie *also in me*" (emphasis in original). Being faithfully present to one another, to God, and to ourselves is a truth telling of what lies in the heart of all of us. None of us has the moral high ground fully and consistently 100 percent of the time. What we're all guilty of in small and large measures is that we have used God and one another for our own particular purposes and concerns, which is what Adam and Eve did. Rather than enjoying God and God's gifts just because, we use, abuse, misuse, or neglect God, one another, and ourselves in the process.

That is why Q/A 8 is a necessary rejoinder. We need God. Our common lot is, we need God. We need the Spirit of God to bring new life to us, to breathe new life, to claim us as children, to cause new hearts—or more accurately, reborn hearts and renewed minds. By intruding, intervening, and downright rebirthing us to become what we were created to always be from the start, the Spirit of God powerfully demonstrates what it means to be faithfully present, and in Jesus Christ, what it means to join with our common lot.

### Prayer

Spirit of the living God, breathe in me, come upon me, flow through me. Renew me. Renovate me. I share a common lot with all Your people in that

I need You. As You did in bringing power and life to the dead body of Jesus Christ from the tomb, so bring new life to my heart and soul, that I may be enlivened in the fullness of God and the fullness of Your world, and thereby delight in You. Amen.