Acta Theologica
2014 Suppl 20: 280-292
DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/actat.v20i1.18S
ISSN 1015-8758

<http://www.ufs.ac.za/ActaTheologica>

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WHAT PROFIT IS THE REIGN OF CHRIST TO US? THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM AND ITS POTENTIAL FOR THE FUTURE

ABSTRACT

The article helps to understand the disturbing statement of the Heidelberg Catechism: "I have a natural tendency to hate God and my neighbor." It unfolds the wide breadth of meaning of "hate" and argues that the catechism offers a deep and realistic understanding of sin. Above all, however, the Heidelberger presents an even richer meaning of "comfort", which can free from the bondage of hate and sin. The article illuminates this comfort given by Christ and His Spirit.

In 2013, communities around the world celebrated the success of the Heidelberg Catechism. The tenor of these celebrations could be summed up under the motto: 450 years of the Heidelberg Catechism – a small book with enormous influence! Amid justified pride, discussions touched on the impressive history of this small confession's influence and impact, an effect felt especially in Germany, the Netherlands, Scotland, Hungary, in South Africa and other African nations, among them Malawi, Nigeria and Zambia, in the United States, and in South Korea. Yet in many contexts attention also turned to just how foreign, distant, and even shocking the language and thought-world of the Catechism had become for modern readers.

Given this development, is there anything to speak *against* the view that the long success story of the Heidelberg Catechism is now coming to an end, that its influence is waning? Can we rebuff the view that the worldwide celebrations of the Catechism's four-hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary were simply marking its swan song, a gracious and melodious collection of obituaries? Or can we honestly recognize any *future potential*

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for the Heidelberg Catechism, something that leads us beyond a mere vague hope and instead drives to hopingly expect such an *effective continuing role?*

In the following article, I would like to concentrate on three thematic areas: (1) the Catechism's pronounced focus on the power of sin; (2) its profit-oriented, religious-existential pragmatics; and (3) the way in which it connects a strong Christological and Spirit-Christological focus with a concentration on a theology of law. For many religious people, at least two of these areas represent the most shocking and unusual sides of the Heidelberg Catechism. Therefore, for each theme I will discuss first just what religious consciousness at the beginning of the third millennium finds so shocking in these themes, and then follow that discussion by showing that all three perspectives are connected with a realistic understanding of the coming reign of God, an understanding that does remain theologically viable for the coming age.

The content of the Heidelberg Catechism concentrates on the Apostles' Creed, on baptism and Holy communion, on the Ten Commandments – the Decalogue – and the Lord's Prayer. It shares this concentration on "essentials" of the Christian faith with other classical catechisms, above all its most significant competition: Martin Luther's Large and Small Catechisms. The three dimensions that I would like to discuss reveal a particular profile and depth to the Catechism's presentation and interpretation of creed, sacrament, Decalogue, and Lord's Prayer.

1. THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM AND ITS DETAILED TREATMENT OF THE POWER OF SIN

If we want to grasp the great comfort that God has prepared for us in the person of Jesus Christ, if we aim to grasp that salvation that has been prepared for us through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, then according to the Heidelberg Catechism we must first know "how great [our] sin and misery are" (answer to Question 2[1]). This misery is expressed in the words of the answer to Question 5: that I am unable to keep the twin commands to love God and my neighbour. In a stifling way, the Catechism states: "I have a natural tendency to hate God and my neighbour." The response to Question 60 tells how "my conscience accuses me of having grievously

1 Except where noted, English translations are taken from the *Heidelberg Catechism: 450th Anniversary Edition* (Grand Rapids: Faith Alive Christian Resources, 2013).

sinned against all God's commandments, of never having kept any of them, and of still being inclined toward all evil."

This and many other similarly shocking statements[2] have given the Heidelberg Catechism a reputation for advocating a "grim anthropology." I, too, long held this view. Can we seriously claim that we have a tendency to "hate God and [our] neighbour"? If by "hate" we think only of aggressive anger and acts of violence, persecution, curses and attacks, then this statement truly will sound jarringly harsh and melodramatically overstated. We may feel that human beings are being unfairly disparaged. Yet the field of meaning surrounding "hate", particularly in the biblical languages, is significantly broader than these examples. It includes the broader sense of "not being able to love" and "not wanting to love." Hate therefore does not just mean animosity, loathing, bitterness and aggression, but also: no longer to endure, to neglect, to underestimate. Here, hate stands for finding someone unpleasant, having little interest or care for someone, not wanting anything to do with someone, not being able to suffer someone, and not liking others (Müller 1997). The Heidelberg Catechism displays a strong sensitivity to the breadth of "hate", a sensitivity seen in its inclusion of "being silent bystanders" in the discussion of blasphemy (Question 99). When discussing love for our neighbour, it urges us to promote our neighbour's honour (Question 112) and calls on us "to do good even to our enemies" (Question 107).

Karl Barth, in his *Church Dogmatics,* characterized sin not only as "arrogance" with its correlated self-glorification and aggressive self-assertion, but also as "lethargy" and "lies."[3] When seen from the perspective of lethargy and lies, hate of God and neighbour then includes all forms of indifference, untruthfulness, and injustice. From this far more nuanced perspective, we see just how great a tendency we have indeed to "hate" God and neighbour.

Yet there are other ways in which we can encounter the realism of the concepts of sin and hate found in the Heidelberg Catechism. Once we place ourselves and our connections to God and neighbour within a larger network, we can examine ourselves from outside this network. A few years ago, the Dutch journalist Geert Mak published an impressive book titled *In Europe: Travels Through the Twentieth Century.* Over the course of a year he travelled through Europe, opening himself up to the history of each country from 1900 to 2000. Each day he filed a report for

2 See here also the many comments about the violence and "tyranny of the devil" (Question 1; Question 9; Question 34; Question 127) and sin which has "so poisoned our nature" (Question 7).

3 Cf. Karl Barth, *KD* IV/1, 395ff; IV/2, 423ff; IV/3, 425ff; also Welker (2011).

his newspaper, the NRC/*Handelsblad.* Geert Mak visited those sites where the great World Wars were meticulously planned, and where they were relentlessly and horrifically waged. He visited the spots where the Russian Revolution played out, and the sites of concentration camps in Germany. He followed the bloody traces of anti-semitism and murder in Germany, as well as anti-semitism in other European countries. He travelled through regions of neo-fascism, locations of separatist attacks in Spain and Italy, of civil wars in Ireland. He travelled to Chernobyl and to Kosovo. The more one reads this book, the more one notices the strong similarities between the reputedly enlightened and civilized Europe of the twentieth century, and those present-day regions of the world over which we so often sigh in resignation.

We are surrounded by many forms of aggressive self-assertion, by obvious as well as latent hostility, and the brutal use of violence. Yet countless manifestations of lethargy, learned helplessness, comfortable indifference, and true feelings of powerlessness also surround us as the "powers of sin."

When eyeing human misery, which human beings so often cause themselves, the Heidelberg Catechism offers a sober and hard analysis. Precisely for this reason, the Catechism has become a model for religious, moral and political resistance in situations where entire societies find themselves at their political, legal, moral and religious limits. The famous 1934 *Barmen Declaration* against the ideology of National Socialism in Germany[4], as well as the influential 1986 *Belhar Confession* against South Africa's apartheid regime (cf. Naudé & Smit 2010) were both oriented toward the central concepts and statements of the Heidelberg Catechism.

Without seeking to relativise the horrific history of hate that occurred during the period of fascism in Germany, a prudently expanded perspective on the real history of the real world allows us to identify in countless other contexts the deep harmartiological insights of the Heidelberg Catechism. To take just one more example from my own country: recent, intense media attention has made broad segments of the German population clearly and irrefutably aware of Germany's current status as the world's third- or fourth-largest weapons manufacturer and supplier on earth. When we understand the broad spectrum of hate and sin as stretching from conscious and unconscious *aggression* over to conscious and unconscious *indifference and lethargy* over against God and our neighbour, over against their helplessness and their suffering, then we must admit that the Heidelberg

4 Cf. *Begründete Freiheit – Die Aktualität der Barmer Theologischen Erklärung. Vortragsreihe zum 75. Jahrestag im Berliner Dom*, Evangelische Impulse 1, Neukirchener: Neukirchen-Vluyn 2009.

Catechism is sadly correct with its depressing statement that we "have a natural tendency to hate God and [our] neighbour."

Yet it is very important that we clarify today a tension that exists in the Heidelberg Catechism and in broad sections of theology, a tension that repeatedly leads to a certain level of irritation. The Catechism speaks of hating God and neighbour as a "natural tendency." Yet it repeatedly stresses that God created human beings good, and that human beings (in the words to the answer to Question 9) "provoked by the devil, in wilful disobedience" have now fallen under the power of sin. It is important in our creation theology to make clear that the "good creation" is neither divine nor paradisal, but that God finds it "good" in all its finitude and mortality. Furthermore, we must recognize the unfortunate truth that in this fleshly and earthly creation, life means living at the cost of other life. Even vegetarians and vegans must destroy infinite amounts of life to preserve themselves. It is a coarse mistake when many people today, out of an understandable ecological concern, speak about "nature" and "life" as if they were not ambivalent but rather salvific entities.

Life under the power of sin is a life that in aggression and self-glorification, yet also in feelings of indifference and impotence, falsely and disastrously refuses to see the limits and powerlessness of creatures. Moreover, it seeks to evade God's love for us and our love for God, as well as broad expanses of interpersonal love. Life under the power of sin ignores and fights against powers for good, powers that can help us to live with and accept our earthly finitude and boundaries. The Heidelberg Catechism relentlessly draws our attention to the drama of this futile battle. Sin simply leads us to misery, and then binds us there – a situation often already recognizable in this world, and without prospects beyond it. But for all its emphasis on the power of sin, the Heidelberg Catechism is anything but a "fire-and-brimstone preacher." It always directs our eyes instead to that one comfort which God has offered us and continues to offer us, not only in life but also in death.

2. THE PROFIT-ORIENTED, RELIGIOUS-EXISTENTIAL PRAGMATICS OF THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM

The Catechism's pronounced focus on the doctrine of sin certainly sounds odd to our modern ears. Yet just as odd is its rhetoric of "payment" and "profit" with regard to spiritual matters. Hans-Georg Ulrichs, university pastor in Heidelberg, and Ulrich Löffler, a former Heidelberg school dean, drew my attention to the possibility that this rhetoric of payment and profit

may be connected to the newly bourgeoning capitalist thought world in which the Heidelberg Catechism developed.

Six times the Catechism asks: "What does it profit us" or "what does it profit you" – only to follow this expression with events such as the birth of Jesus Christ, his cross, his resurrection, his ascension, and his glorification.[5] "What … profit do we receive from the sacrifice and death of Christ on the cross?" (Question 43). "What profit is this glory of Christ, our head, unto us?" (Question 51). To our modern sensibilities, such questions strike us as religiously improper and rather tasteless. Yet the Heidelberg Catechism has not only a very honest and realistic understanding of human evil and its associated miseries, but also a realistic understanding of the power of God's goodness, of faith and its fruits. It does not shy away from the pragmatic question: Why is it worth believing in God and Jesus Christ?

We could sum up the central concept in the answers to this question with a single word: *comfort* (the deep German Word: *Trost*). Thus the Catechism famously begins with the question: "What is your only comfort in life and in death?" (Question 1). Yet the concept of comfort is even more multifaceted than that of hate. The word *comfort* has an incredibly broad spectrum of meaning – not only in English and German. It stands for security; it stands for hope; it stands for trust and self-confidence; courage in the face of danger and also in the face of life. It is associated with lasting dependability, help, stability, advice, salvation, with calmness and tranquility, with strength, support, shielding and protection, but also with sympathy, compassion and encouragement. The German Dictionary compiled by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm states that "in modern times the gradually and increasingly more prevalent meaning" of comfort is "steadfastness, which is given or received through words of encouragement as an emotional boost" (Vol. 22, Col. 903).

In this development, the religious, psychological, familial and comradely spectrum of meanings drove back those from military and other contexts. Comfort became a spring from which we "draw", a light, peace, joy, and was associated even with salvation and redemption. God and God's Word, Jesus Christ, his cross and the scriptures give comfort. But comfort also comes from a parent's love, from children, from one's spouse, and from a good friend. The powers of comfort are also ascribed in European modernity, though less commonly, to nature, to memory, a good conscience, literature, academic pursuit, philosophy, and even death.

5 See here Questions 28, 36, 43, 45, 49, 51, but also 125. The modern English translation now offers in these instances "help" or "benefit". The older English translation of "profit" retains the financial sense of the German original, and I will use that here.

According to the Heidelberg Catechism, we are unable to grant *ourselves* this inner steadfastness that supports us "in life and death," nor can we freely give it to others, despite our best intentions. As we have already seen, the Catechism understands human life as deeply endangered, both from within and without. We are finite, we must die. We stand exposed to dangers and are subjected under evil powers, primarily due to our own guilt but also against our will and against our own actions. In dramatic fashion, the Catechism speaks repeatedly of "all my sins" and of "the tyranny of the devil" (cf. the answers to Questions 1, 9, 32, 34, as well as Question 127). In very real ways, these powers entrap us and seek to deform or destroy our lives. We are caught in webs of guilt and disaster out of which we desperately need to be freed. We must grasp and follow this basic conviction if we hope to comprehend the theology of the Heidelberg Catechism.

Liberation from the power of evil and from the hate it spawns (in all its conspicuous and concealed forms) – this is the great *profit* of that comfort God gives us through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. This comfort grants us a liberated life. It gives us security, hope, trust and self-confidence, and courage, even in the most difficult stages of life. It opens to us the powers of dependability, of help, of stability and advice, of support and protection, from God and God's Word and Spirit, but also from those around us who have been filled and moved by this Word and Spirit. God grants us calmness and tranquility, but also sympathy and compassion so that in love, in compassion and in the pursuit of truth, justice, freedom and peace we ourselves may also grant this comfort to many around us.

Yet our striving is not just for a comforted and liberated life on earth with all its internal and external threats. Rather it transcends this life and aims at a spiritual and eternal life, a steadfastness that gives us comfort and stability even "in death" and beyond this transitory life. This liberating comfort and stability is offered to us by *the reign of Christ*, not only in this life but also beyond it.

3. A CHRISTOLOGICAL AND SPIRIT-CHRISTOLOGICAL CONCENTRATION IN CONNECTION WITH A THEOLOGY OF LAW

The answer to the first question of the Heidelberg Catechism "What is your only comfort in life and death?" is not simply: "*Jesus Christ* is my only comfort in life and death." This was often mistakenly repeated, especially when highlighting the closeness of the Catechism to those other important, twentieth-century confessions that grew from times of ecclesial

resistance: the so-called "Christocentric" *Barmen Declaration* against National Socialism with its message that "Jesus Christ … is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death"; and the South African *Belhar Confession* against apartheid, which closes with the strong paragraph just stating: "5.1 Jesus is Lord."

Yet according to the Heidelberg Catechism, our comfort lies more precisely in the affirmation that "*I am not my own,* but belong – body and soul, in life and in death – to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ" (Answer to Question 1, emphasis added). The already performed and ever newly continuing redemption and protection that comes through Jesus Christ, or more precisely through his giving of the Holy Spirit which "assures me of eternal life and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him" – it is this relationship to Christ's reign and this occurrence which is our decisive comfort.[6] It is about *our being and our life in Christ,* about being under his protection, being included in his reign, in his kingdom. This reign of Christ is not only represented in Questions 29-52 (under the title "God the Son"), but also in Questions 53–64 ("God the Holy Spirit") and Questions 65–85 ("The Holy Sacraments"). The effective work of Jesus Christ, the Anointed One, as a prophet and teacher, as high priest and eternal king (Question 31) makes clear the astonishing breadth and pluriformity of this *comfort* that we experience through him, through the Holy Spirit, and through a life lived in the domain of his power.[7] However, before we unpack this idea we must draw attention to the third and perhaps greatest hurdle that the Catechism places in our way today.

In Part I, under the title "Human Misery" (Questions 3-10), the Heidelberg Catechism describes why we are so desperately dependent on that comfort granted through Jesus Christ, his beneficial work, and his Holy Spirit. God may well have created people (despite their finitude and mortality) to be God's image, but through our own fault and due to devilish involvement people fell out of this relationship with God. While God hates this state of estrangement and wants to save humanity, God does not want to be compassionate at the cost of his sense of justice. According to the Heidelberg Catechism, this justice requires "punishment" and "payment" (Questions 11 and 12). The Catechism operates in penal and, for its time quite "modern," economic categories. It speaks, therefore, a language which has become religiously foreign and offensive to many

6 This dynamic between Christ and the Spirit is only insufficiently grasped in the expression "The presence of the Comforter is the comfort" (Barth 1960:16); on this pneumatologically abbreviated "Christocentrism" cf. also Welker (2009).

7 Cf. here "Vom dreifachen Amt Christi – König, Priester, Prophet [Calvin] – zur dreifachen Gestalt des Reiches Christi" (Welker 2012:195ff).

people today. It is only through more recent research and discussion in atonement theology that a point of access into the associated topics of sin, sacrifice and atonement could be rediscovered.

Christian theology was long dominated by a paradigm which said that God is compassionate, but also just. Through sin, human beings have estranged themselves from God's justice and opposed themselves to it. In this way they have earned temporal and eternal punishment. Yet God wanted and wants to have mercy on them. But to do so, the compassionate and just God needs compensation (satisfaction). Sinful human beings are not in a position to offer this compensation. Therefore, God chooses his own Son, a "sinless lamb" (e.g. John 1:29, 36; Rev 5:6), and gives him a bloody death in order to save all humanity.

The Tübingen Old Testament scholar Hartmut Gese, in his groundbreaking essay *Die Sühne* [*Atonement*] (Gese 1977:85-106) offered innovative systematic insights that also clarified the biblical theology around this concept. In doing so, he set in motion a multiyear discourse which brought the topics of sacrifice and atonement back onto the stage of constructive theological thought[8] – despite the persistent irritations roused up by popular theology and contemporary religious feeling. With sacrifice and atonement, God seeks to display to all humanity their helplessness, insecurity, and forlornness. Yet through a symbolic act and a substitutionary sacrifice God also seeks to liberate and lead people out of this helplessness and sense of forlornness.

Yet in contrast, the Heidelberg Catechism still thinks along the lines of a compensatory system. The true misery of human beings is that they have no way to make the payment which God demands of them. They try again and again, but this only increases their misery and distress. They become entangled more and more in their own self-centeredness and selfishness. Today, it may well still be conceivable that God does not resign himself to this situation because he is just. But that God should now demand punishment and payment, such an idea repulses many people. People may find it acceptable if it is only the fate of brutal criminals that is at stake, but how could it also be this way for those helplessly and accidentally entrapped, those who are not even aware of their own hate or who are themselves suffering under the conditions of hate in this world?

The Catechism, however, does not focus its attention or ours on divine punishment and its horrific effects upon us. Rather, in Part II on "Deliverance", it presents us with God's pathway out of this crisis. God himself in the person of Jesus Christ takes that human distress upon

8 For a particularly enlightening discussion, see: Sigrid Brandt (2001).

himself. In Jesus Christ, God grants us justification and a new life, that we ourselves cannot endanger or destroy. This new life is realized through the power of the Holy Spirit and is accepted in faith. The almighty God and Creator, who gives not only good but also "whatever adversity he sends me in this sad world" (Question 26), reveals himself in this comfort as the good and faithful Father.

To be sure, human beings must still continue to live with this finite and ambivalent creation, they must live with rain and drought, fruitful and lean years, health and sickness, with the inequitable distribution of poverty and riches (Question 27). Yet we know now that God encounters us in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit as comfort, that in our suffering he grants us not only patience and bravery but also the power to resist and a preparedness to help; and that in times of joy he gives us not only gratitude but also the loving willingness to draw many others into it.

This comfort becomes wholly concrete and realistic in our participation in the reign of Christ.[9] By receiving through the Spirit a share of his *kingly power,* we are then enabled to perform acts of love and the service of diakonia. Protecting the weak in their need, fighting against physical suffering and illness, engaging ourselves in the education of others and the liberation that results from it – all of these are characteristic of this dimension of discipleship. The good and convincing mission work of the church has always allowed itself to be led in this way. At the same time, this king is also a brother and friend, and thus he persistently calls into question all pompous and mono-hierarchical clerics as well as all hierarchical and excluding forms of political rule.

By receiving through the Spirit a share of Jesus Christ's *priestly power,* our eyes are turned toward life in the church and in the worship service (in the narrower sense), and we are invited to take an active part in that life. Prayer, the worship service, the public teaching of scripture, proclamation, the celebration of the sacraments, and a liturgical life aimed at glorifying God and in anticipation of eschatological blessing – these all characterize this dimension of Christ's reign. In prayer, doxology, and the dignified worship of the church, we anticipate now the eschatological joy that God prepares for us even beyond the limits of our earthly lives. In the teaching and preaching of the scriptures in church, we see already a further, third dimension of the reign of Christ.

By receiving through the Spirit a share of Jesus Christ's *prophetic power,* we can participate in Christ's nonviolent opposition against the powers of sin and death, powers revealed and unmasked at the foot of

9 On the following, cf. also Welker (2012, Parts 4 and 5).

his cross. The cross of Christ makes clear to us that we human beings can also misuse and pervert good powers: the powers of law and justice, morality, politics, public opinion, and even of religion itself. In this way, the powers of the good law are no longer tools for comfort but are transformed instead into instruments of hate. In discipleship under the true Prophet and through the power of his Spirit we are enabled to join his conflict against those powers, and to place ourselves into prophetic service, despite the temptations and sufferings that often accompany such discipleship. Binding up victims under the wheel can be dangerous. But jamming oneself prophetically into the spokes of that wheel is often painful and sometimes even lethal. Nevertheless, at all these levels of Christian discipleship comfort is promised and given to us: security, trust, confidence, courage and hope. We become recipients but also bearers of a lasting dependability, help, stability, advice, salvation, calmness and tranquillity, of strength and support, of a sense of shielding and protection, but also of sympathy, compassion and encouragement.

4. CONCLUSION

According to the Heidelberg Catechism, the comfort given in Christ and His Spirit allows us "to be patient when things go against us, thankful when things go well" (Question 28), to set our sights on a broader horizon of life, one that is greater than our transitory, earthly existence. Amid all the finitude, transitoriness and discord of our existence, we know that we are blessed with something greater and more complete. This greater life, however, shines through already now in experiences of love and compassion, of truth and justice, of freedom and peace. It reveals already now the power of the eternally living God. We take part in the coming reign of God and aim at its completed arrival. Importantly, this eternal comfort is not some vague other-worldly hope, but rather "makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for [Jesus Christ]" (Question 1).

The Catechism repeatedly calls Jesus, the Son of God, "Savior", the Maker of our Salvation (e.g. Question 29). This Maker of our Salvation does not pluck people out of the ambivalence and distress of this earthly life, but rather grants them the ability "to strive with a free conscience against sin and the devil in this life" (Question 32), and gives them the certainty of reigning with Christ in eternal life. Christ takes away our fears of a dark death and an uncertain and incalculable "last judgement". Instead the cross of Jesus Christ reveals to us in striking clarity the final ruin of death and the downfall of human and divine judgement.

Through Christ's resurrection we are included now already in his new life, and we receive the promise of a share in his eternal life. In many passages, the Heidelberg Catechism describes this life which has been strengthened through the power of the Resurrected One. To those who hold to Christ in faith, he gives the Holy Spirit, he gives spiritual gifts which lend us strength against all earthly enemies, but he also reveals us many kingly, priestly and prophetic responsibilities. He gives us power so that "with uplifted head" (Question 52) we can hope in his final judgment and face that life in the future world with quiet resolve and joy, because – amidst all sin and hate – this life under the reign of Christ is already present with us, in us, among us and around us.

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Keywords	*Trefwoorde*
A realistic understanding of sin and hate	'n Realistiese verstaan van sonde en haat
A realistic understanding of comfort in Jesus Christ	'n Realistiese verstaan van troos in Jesus Christus
Spirit-Christology	Gees-Christologie
The threefold office and the threefold reign of Christ	Die drievoudige amp en drievoudige regering van Christus