

Heidelberg Catechism, Week 1: What is your only comfort in life? Psalm 46, John 14:1-8 Portions adapted from *Comforting Hearts Teaching Minds*, Steve Meade, pg 12, and Center for Excellence in Preaching, Lord's Day 1 (<http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/heidelberg-catechism/>).

Do you ever imagine "what if ...?" What if things went horribly wrong? What if you became seriously ill and would not be getting better? What if something horrible happened to your home, your family? Because of sin, all kinds of bad things do happen in this world. Is there anything that can comfort us if the worst "what ifs" should happen?

The Psalmist we read today was imagining just such "what ifs"

- What if tremendous earthquakes tossed even the mountains down into the seas?
- What if war wiped out everything in the world that we ever loved?

Those are truly fearful "what ifs." Yet the psalmist found comfort remembering that, even then, God would be our refuge and strength. God is our fortified city where even in the worst of the "what ifs" we can dwell without fear for the Lord of Hosts will be our very present help.

That is a very comforting thought, don't you think? Whatever "what if" comes our way, we need only remember to "*be still and know that our Lord is God.*" Then as citizens of the City of God, we will not be moved.

And think for a moment about our second scripture text. On the very night that he was knowingly walking towards his own death, knowing that he was leaving to his followers a ministry that would at the end of their own lives bring them to very similar deaths, Jesus turns to His disciples and says, "*do not let your hearts be troubled, believe in God, believe also in me. ... I am the way, the truth, the life; no one comes to the Father except through me ... which is where I am now going with the promise to come again to take you back with me so that you may live where I live – in my Father's house-- forever. (John 14:1-8 paraphrased)*

Jesus words are also very comforting, don't you think? Once again we hear His promise of lifelong Godly protection and the security of an eternal home whatever "what ifs" come our way.

But did you notice that both of these promises came with a condition? Such comfort, such present help, such refuge is only for those who name and place their reliance upon God as their Lord; or as the Heidelberg Catechism phrases it: these promises are **only for those who belong to our faithful savior Jesus Christ.**

Think about that for a moment in this tottering world in which we now live. Think about how desperately everyone could use this kind of comfort which only comes from knowing that God is in ultimate control of our lives, that *we are His people, the sheep of His pasture* (Psalm 100:3). Where else in today's world can

you find such comfort to live fearlessly even though the earth changes and the mountains fall down into the sea.

Friends, like the “what if” world of the Psalmist, ours is truly a world of falling mountains, rising seas, and tottering kingdoms. It is a place where the truth is masked by political mandate or media manipulation; a world where terrorists lurk in the bushes and hate us for reasons we cannot grasp; a place where few things are certain or presented as they truly are. And so we tend, like everyone else, to weigh all things on a sliding gray scale of doubt. Skepticism has grown rampant.

Tell most people that we really ought to trust our elected officials, and they’ll respond, “*Yeah, right.*” On the other hand, tell them that a certain political or religious leader has fallen into trouble, and they’ll respond, “*Duh.*” We can only be sure about one thing these days and that is that we can never be sure about much. And so statements of confidence are met with “*Yeah, right!*” and stories of trouble are met with “*Duh.*” We don’t expect much good anymore.

So if you were asked, “*What is your only comfort, in life and in death?*” How would you respond? Could you respond as follows?

My only comfort in life and death is that I belong—body and soul, in life and in death—not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ, who at the cost of his own blood has fully paid for all my sins and has

completely freed me from the dominion of the devil ...

These opening words from the Heidelberg Catechism are simply the Psalmist, and Jesus’, and all the Bible’s declarations summarized and then laid out in study guide form (to encourage our learning and taking such truths deep into our hearts). We as Christians need to be honest about what we proclaim to be our only comfort. We need to be able to speak about what is our only hope precisely because a lot of what goes on in this world is rotten, unfair, not the way it’s supposed to be. We need this “only comfort” because all of our other potential comforts of life have turned out to be false or fragile.

Every day people discover:

- that a trusted friend has betrayed them,
- that a beloved spouse has had an affair,
- that a precious child has died or left home for good,
- that a once-secure job has been downsized into oblivion,
- that a solid investment of life savings has evaporated like the morning mist,
- that medical science can’t solve your particular disease,
- and that someone you once respected has let you down.

These things happen and they happen with sickening regularity. We Christians do not profess Jesus as our only

comfort lightly. We do so because honesty tells us that there is nothing else in life that is certain.

So is "belonging to Jesus" your only comfort in a world of terror, decay, and death?

Believe it or not, our current world with so much tension between the haves and have-nots, so easily overrun with killers and the killed, is not much different from Europe in the mid-sixteenth century. That was also a time of great change, a time of surface prosperity, hollow faiths, and self-serving politicians. It was a world of crumbling kingdoms and tottering powers, populated with those who would gladly kill you because of your differing religion. It was in just such a world that the Heidelberg Catechism was written. So whether it be 1560 or 2016, as declared by the opening lines of this Catechism, it can be a surprising comfort to learn that we are not our own.

Have you also noticed the irony that this comfort we find in realizing that we are not our own... (according to The Catechism *that I belong body, soul, and spirit to God*), is a totally opposite way of thinking from what the world is pushing today.

In 1948, the Human Rights Commission of the United Nations published a "**Universal Declaration of Human Rights**." Article one of this declaration states that "*All human beings are born free.*"

- As you scan through this declaration, you learn that freedom means having the right to do

whatever I want to do, so long as it does not hurt anybody else.

- I have the right to say whatever I want to say.
- I have the right to think whatever I want to think.
- And I have the right to go wherever I want to go.

So, according to the Human Rights Commission, as a human being, I am born with one inalienable right: that "I am my own boss, the master of my own destiny." Or to put it in other words: "**I AM MY OWN!** And nobody can take that right away from me."

"**I AM MY OWN**" has certainly become the mantra of our age, the philosophy that most people live by, and we Christians are not entirely immune to thinking that way at times either. But right from the start this Catechism drops a bombshell on that way thinking! The very first thing it states is: "**I AM NOT MY OWN**, I belong to someone else." And this is not a partial or temporary arrangement; it includes both my body and soul, and it lasts throughout my life and beyond my death. This Catechism declares that we fully and completely belong to Jesus Christ.

Now, the wisdom of this world would say to us, "That is utterly foolish! That is downright scary! If you relinquish your rights as a human being, and if you are owned by someone else, that will only lead to oppression, abuse and exploitation! Just look at history! Countless millions of slaves have been owned by other people. Countless millions of minorities and workers have been mistreated and suffered under unimaginably cruel oppression. So, the only way to enjoy life is to guarantee that everybody

is his or her own boss." This is what is taught in the lecture halls of our universities. This fills our TV sitcoms and talk shows. This is the beat on the street. People say, "I'm gonna do it my way. Because I'm in charge of me."

(pause)

And how has this worked out for you?
Do you feel comforted standing there alone?

Friends do NOT be duped by the so-called wisdom of this world! Instead, the Heidelberg Catechism calls for us who name ourselves as Christian, with all our hearts and souls to embrace the profound wisdom and comfort in declaring: "I AM NOT MY OWN!"

Why? Because this truth is, as are all other truths taught by this Catechism, was taken right from the words of our Bibles and this was the clear intention of the authors, to answer all questions as much as possible by scriptural quotations. For instance the "I am not my own" truth comes from the Apostle Paul's letter to the Corinthian Christians:

Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body. (I Corinthians 6:19-20)

This is also a truth we echo in our hymns: *Now I belong to Jesus and Jesus belongs to me, not for the years of time alone but for eternity.*

"I belong to Jesus." It is such a simple confession. A child can learn it. Even as pre-schoolers, they can know the comfort of belonging to Jesus Christ. And a child also shows us our need to belong. Certainly as they grow up, children begin striving for independence. We have all heard the familiar childish refrain: "*I can do it! Let me do it!*" But what happens when the going gets rough, when they fall off a bike or their brother calls them a nasty name. They quickly run to Mom or Dad with tears streaming down their cheeks and a sad, quivering voice, seeking comfort and consolation. You see, children need to know that they belong. And there, close to Mom or Dad, snuggled tightly inside that bond of love and care, there they slowly gain the courage to go back outside again. So in the child you can see an eternal truth with your own eyes. God did not create us to be completely independent, self-ruling creatures. Our God designed us to belong.

But the wisdom of this world still insists, "Yes, but the moment you belong, you lose your rights, you lose your freedom! You are opening yourself to be manipulated by others!" But precisely here is the crux of our fallen human condition. In fact, we do NOT have any freedom to lose! Ever since the Fall, not one, single human being has been born free. We and our children are born spiritually dead, alienated from God, into a cursed and fallen world, where the prince of this world works diligently to keep his minions blinded from the truth that true freedom and abundant life can only be found in belonging to Jesus (2 Corinthians 4:1-4).

This is our universal human condition that the Catechism makes very clear; either we are alive to the world (in other words: under its influence) and dead to Christ, or we are alive to Christ and dead to the world. Those are our only two options. So ours is not the choice between freedom or ownership, but between who owns us; one master brings only slavery and death, the other master offers freedom and life (Ephesians 5:8, Colossians 2:8-14).

And surprisingly, according to our Bible, even that choice is not ours. The Bible teaches that we are dead in sin, until we have been made alive by Christ (Ephesians 2:4-6). That is to say, we are born locked in the iron chains of iniquity. And there's only One Person who holds the key to unlock those heavy chains. And that person is

my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ, who at the cost of his own blood has fully paid for all my sins and has completely freed me from the dominion of the devil;

Therefore, having been freed from death by Jesus, I now belong exclusively and entirely to Jesus. I gladly confess: He has full rights over me! And this is not an oppressive burden! It is just the opposite! This is what gives me true freedom! When Christ has the exclusive rights over you, then he also has full responsibility for you. The two always go together. If you own a house, then you are also responsible for its well being. It's not your neighbor's responsibility to take care of your house; it's your responsibility to care for that which you own!

This is what the Heidelberg Catechism teaches. Christ has fully paid for me. I am His. And so, He takes full responsibility for me. Jesus Christ takes responsibility for the eternal destiny of my soul. Jesus Christ has also accepted full responsibility for taking care of my physical body, complete with all its various weaknesses and illnesses; until that day, when as promised he can give me a new body in a new home, both designed to last for eternity.

"I AM NOT MY OWN!"

How is this confession sounding to you now?

What a relief!

- I cannot pay off all my sins, but Christ has done it!
- I cannot work my way free from the devil, but Christ has done it!
- My body, my soul, my life, my death are all in the hands of my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ. And there could not possibly be any better hands to hold me!

Herein lies your only comfort which you will not find anywhere else. Anyone with even the smallest amount of life experience knows that this world is not a bed of roses.

- How many disappointments... frustrations... and anxieties... have you experienced?
- How many tears... outbursts of anger.... cries of despair have you uttered?
- How much slander... brokenness... bitterness have you endured?

It is a fallen world we live in. And when it fell, it broke! It broke like a glass vase that shatters into a thousand pieces of misery! And we all have to walk through it...as sinners... sinners who are just as fallen and just as broken as the world around us! That's what you and I get to wake up to every morning...unless we belong to Christ.

It is for this very reason that the Catechism goes straight to the heart of our human problem. The first thing that anyone needs to know in a world such as ours is the comfort that comes from knowing everything will eventually work out for good. This comfort gives us the courage, when we stumble in this fallen world, to stand up again and keep-on-going! This comfort goes with us when we descend into a dark valley even when we don't know what's in it or what's on the other side! So, where do we find this amazing, all-encompassing comfort! In these two little words, "**I belong...**"

Comfort. Comfort. Do we maybe emphasize comfort too much? Do ministers perhaps preach so much about "comfort" that their sermons become lullabies which put members of the congregation to sleep, maybe even on an uncomfortable, hardwood pew surrounded by hundreds of other people? Should we not pay more attention to the necessity of our response? It's true! There must be a response to God's comfort on our part. Scripture says: Faith without works is dead.

And so, after its comforting introduction, this Catechism also pays attention to our response. The third section –

the biggest section of the Catechism – is all about our response of thankfulness. But first we have to deal with our sin and misery, and the cost of our salvation. Then we can know just how precious our comfort really is. Then we will know just how much we have to be thankful for.

In Christ, I gain forgiveness and eternal life. In Christ, I also gain a faithful Father in heaven. In Christ, I gain His indwelling Holy Spirit who works right inside my heart. What a comfort that is! Only two little words, but what a comfort it is to say: **I belong!**

This is why the Heidelberg Catechism, a Biblical study guide written nearly 500 years ago is perhaps the best guide for us today. There are certainly other confessions and catechisms. The PCUSA has a whole book of such– and this year we added even another--but no other confession so clearly explains the joy and comfort we find in knowing that "we belong."

Today more than ever we need to know three basic eternal truths about our lives in Christ. As the second question of the Catechism summarizes them, they are:
First, the greatness of my sin and wretchedness.
Second, how I am freed from all my sins and their wretched consequences.
Third, what gratitude I owe to God for such redemption.

And this is what the rest of the Catechism explains in simple, graspable detail–such that it can even be learned by a child and yet appreciated by an adult.

Now right from the start, you need to know that the Heidelberg Catechism is not the Bible. It is not inspired like we believe the Bible to be inspired. It is simply an organized lesson to help us understand what the Bible says about God, about us and our need for a savior, and the comfort we can have in knowing that we are not our own.

But I do believe that this is the lesson that we need to learn and live with in every part of our being in order to thrive in this day of national uproar and tottering kingdoms. It is this confession – that “I am not my own” – which can give me the peace to “be still and know that God is God” and no one else. I am looking forward to the next four weeks of sharing this Confession with you and then I pray that you might continue on with these studies in your own home.

So as we prepare to come to the Communion table to remember the price paid for our lives, let’s pray together.