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... BUT ALSO JUST: REFLECTIONS ON THE SEVERE GOD OF THE CATECHISM

ABSTRACT

The seemingly harsh texts about God's justice and wrath in the Heidelberg Catechism turn out to be the core of the comfort that the catechisms proclaims, if we read the catechism contextually. The same is the case with regard to providence when the catechism claims that also poverty and illness come from God's fatherly hand.

1. COMFORT

The Heidelberg Catechism is considered to be a book of consolation. The very first question puts comfort into the focus of Christian faith. Again and again the teacher asks the pupils: "What is your comfort ... ?" Christian faith is a message of consolation, of hope, of deliverance. It is precisely for this reason that the catechism begins with our misery. This may seem to be a pessimistic approach to life. The fact is, however, that the catechism merely emphasizes the gravity of the human condition. People live in misery. The catechism does not start with a good creation, a wonderful paradise of integrity. It begins with misery, for this is reality. It does not make sense to reflect on an ideal state of perfection, somewhere in the ancient past, if we live in a woeful situation now. It does not make sense to dream of a "paradise lost", if life in the present is hell. The catechism does not dream about good old times. It brings human beings face to face with the situation in which they are: in misery. It does not avoid the issue for fear of a harsh confrontation. It submits the problem of human guilt and suffering for discussion immediately. We have to deal with a terrible problem: human misery. The catechism confronts us with it without delay – and it does so

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with the aim of consolation. The greatest comfort is the message that we are saved from our misery by Christ. It is not necessary to elaborate that the catechism is a book of comfort, for it is generally accepted that “it is a remarkably warm-hearted and personalized confession of Faith” (CRCNA). We are saved because God is merciful.

2. A SEVERE GOD

“God is certainly merciful”, the Catechism proclaims, but then adds: “but also just” (A. 11). This introduces a different perspective on God. As far as it is a matter of comfort and mercy, the image we have is that of a caring, loving God who saves his children from their misery, even if this misery results from their own transgressions. The “but” of answer 11 seems to turn everything upside down. It confronts us with a different God: a God who is not caring, but a God of law and order. Answer 11 refers to the previous answer:

God is terribly angry with the sin in which we are born, as well as the sins we personally commit. As a just judge, God will punish them both now and in eternity, having declared: ‘Cursed is everyone who does not observe and obey all the things written in the book of the law’.(A. 10).

Thus God does not permit transgressions of his law to go unpunished (Q and A. 10). This God is not a merciful, but a wrathful God. Belief in this God does not provide comfort but evokes fear. If we listen to answer 10 we see anxious human beings trembling before an angry God. Maarten ‘t Hart draws a similar picture of God. He describes how elders of the church quote the Lord’s Day 10 which states: that both health and illness are given by God. The young man, whom they try to console, cannot accept this God who gave his mother cancer. In defense of his poor mother he throws the elders into the canal – thereby actually throwing God into the canal. If God is the God of the Lord’s Day 10 then we must make short work of such a God (‘t Hart 1977).¹

The church claims to be a place of mercy. However, if the church confesses such a harsh God, it follows that she, too, is not solely merciful. That is apparent from the catechism. The Holy Communion is an event of forgiveness and mercy, but the catechism tells us that reprobate sinners,

1 Maarten ‘t Hart’s book *Een vlucht regenwulpen* has been a bestseller from its first publication in 1977 until now. Over 1,5 million copies have been sold. It has also been filmed. Now 36 years after its publication it has been chosen as the core book for literature in the Netherlands for the year 2014.

who are considered to be excluded from the community, must also be excluded from the Lord's Supper (A. 85).

There are more instances in the catechism that do not agree with the assessment that "it is a remarkably warm-hearted and personalized confession of Faith". Answer 5 burdens us with a very negative perspective on human beings: "I have a natural tendency to hate God and my neighbour." Is this really how human beings are? This negative attitude also comes to light in the third edition of the Heidelberg Catechism in its reaction to the Roman Catholic Church after the council of Trent. It labels the Mass as an "accursed idolatry" (A. 80).

It seems that we can only draw the conclusion that the catechism is at best ambiguous regarding God's mercy and the comfort that faith in Him provides. Anger and even brutality also seems present, both in God and in the church. Can believers really find peace if they must always fear a just and angry God, who may make their loved ones ill tomorrow?

3. IN CONTEXT

In order to understand what these counter testimonies to the catechism as a book of comfort mean, we must put them in the context of the time of its origin and of its sources. Superficially, one could argue that in the sixteenth century people were more accustomed to violence than we are, or at least that they accepted violence and oppression more readily than we do. It was still before the Enlightenment, and God as the controlling power whom we must fear, corresponded to a view of the submission of people to those in power. It was the time before the separation of powers and the pedagogics of Spock. Thus we must not be amazed to find traces of this in the catechism.

If we stop here, however, we will not discover the real contextuality of these texts. If we delve deeper in history and the historical environment of the catechism, it will become clear that when misery is overwhelming, the deepest expressions of comfort are to be found precisely in these seemingly counter-testimonies. They provide comfort when life in all its facets is no longer manageable and human beings are caught in a net of miseries.

4. ANSELM²

The reasoning of answers 10-18 of the catechism is borrowed from Anselm's *Cur Deus homo?* Anselm lived at the end of the eleventh and the beginning of the twelfth century – a time of political instability in Europe (Bredero 1987). Central government was ineffectual and at times non-existent. Many local knights and regional lords took the opportunity to gain power, wealth and influence. It was an ongoing struggle of vying dukes, earls, bishops and other leaders, using any means and any weapons. There was no one with the power or authority to lay down the rules of engagement, let alone enforce them. To increase their wealth, many knights roamed into neighboring regions plundering cities, ransacking farms and instilling fear into the people, thus ensuring their subjection.

In their own territory they ruled as they pleased. They had absolute power, thus effectually enslaving their subjects. The people were entirely at the mercy of the caprices of the lords and the good or evil whims of the kings. Usually the leaders were surrounded by groups of followers who supported the lords to their own advantage. The children of the leaders were generally part of this clique – at least as long as they were obedient and posed no threat to the power of the father. As long as the father was safely in power, they were allowed to do whatever they wanted – raping, murdering, and pillaging at will.

Eleventh century Europe was a world much like the world of the twenty-first century where dictators and warlords are controlling people's fate, having the power over life and death. It was a world like present-day Lybia or eastern Congo. It was a time without mercy and without justice. It was a time of capricious leaders and anxious people.

In this political turmoil, knights would arise who were men of honor. They did not treat their people as mere chattels to further their own ends, but cared for those who were dependent on them. They introduced laws which also applied to their own inner circle. They did not allow a member of their council, who was guilty of wrong-doing, to go unpunished. This also applied to their sons.

Living under the rule of such a knight was really a gift from heaven. People found relief. They felt safe and took heart. They were inspired to follow the example of their lord and live as decent citizens. Law-abiding towns were granted certain privileges. It was a boon to live under such a lord.

2 See for an evaluation of Anselm's argument also Van de Beek 2002: 200-213.

The example of such a lord corresponds to Anselm's image of God. God is not capricious. God does not exploit his people. God does not punish the just and let the evildoer go free. God does not have an inner circle which is above the law. It is God's honour to be just.

Now we can understand the phrase: "God is merciful, but He is also just." Knights were often "merciful". If a friend had committed a crime, he was not punished. This is not God's kind of mercy, says Anselm, for such a mercy is at the expense of the victims. God's mercy is for the salvation of victims. Therefore the criminal who took the land or the house of the poor should be punished. Just retribution is necessary to sustain a just, safe and responsible society.

Therefore God does not even save his own Son. If Christ takes the sins of the world upon Him and makes Himself a guarantor for the guilt of all human beings, He cannot escape responsibility. A guarantor is accountable. If God would make an exception for his Son, He would not be just. Then his mercy would be just as capricious as the mercy of most medieval knights. God is different. He is a just ruler, who "rather than ... leave sin unpunished, punished it in his beloved son, Jesus Christ, with the bitter and shameful death of the cross" (*Form for the Celebration of the Lord's Supper*). Therefore the catechism says:

Because God's justice and truth require it, nothing else could pay for our sins except the death of the Son of God (A. 40).

God is not merely a lord among the other lords. He is the highest Lord. He governs the whole world and he will bring about justice for the whole world. That is precisely his mercy. When people suffered under the exploitation and injustice of capricious lords, they could call on this highest Lord, who would give them justice and punish the oppressors, the killers, the rapists.

5. ANSELM IN SIXTEENTH CENTURY CONTEXT

The situation in the sixteenth century differed very much from the eleventh. Many things had improved. The power of competing knights was curbed. Robber knights had disappeared. Powerful kings and emperors ruled in most European countries. Society was relatively stable and safe. Sixteenth century Europe could rather be compared with present-day world powers such as the USA, Russia or China than with Lybia or Congo.

Nevertheless, people suffered. They suffered from local governments who had not yet adapted to the new times. Labourers were still exploited

by landlords and their wives and daughters were not safe from the lusts of the rich and their sons. Being dependent still implied being at the mercy of arbitrariness. It was a silent suffering of many people who could not complain without the risk of losing their income, their home, their place in the community in which they lived.

In addition, the sixteenth century brought a new version of the former wars of competing knights: war at the borders of the empires where the kings and emperors tried to enlarge their dominion. Even worse were the struggles of people for political freedom and change. Many men lost their lives in Switzerland when the cantons defended their independence. The revolt of desperate farmers in Germany, who rose up against the imperial power, was brutally crushed. Conflicts, in which religion and political freedom and power were intertwined, grew in sixteenth century Europe, ending in the horrible thirty years war in Germany in the seventeenth century. During that war about 50% of the German population was lost (Vermeulen 2010:9).³ Germany of that time was like present-day Syria and worse. And as usual in civil wars, most of the people, who were victims in all these sixteenth and seventeenth century clashes, had nothing to do with the conflicts, most of all women and children. The competing enemies were first of all *their* enemies.

However, there was a power that evoked more fear than the landlords and the wars in the sixteenth century. That was the power of the church. The oppression by church leaders was enormous. After centuries of plague and anxiety and preachers who proclaimed the wrath of God, people were defenceless. The church did not provide a shelter for these terrified people. On the contrary, the church exploited their fear. Church leaders used it for their own ends and these ends were not the love and glory of Christ, but a luxurious, decadent life, political influence, and vast edifices built in order to establish their fame forever. The poor were manipulated to give their last coin. They were subordinated, humbled, abused. The name of God was used as an instrument in this perverse power-play. The holy Eucharist became an instrument for church leaders to exploit the poor: if you do not give money, you will not receive the holy communion, and consequently you will not attain eternal life, but everlasting damnation.

It is against this background that in the third edition of the Heidelberg Catechism the editors added that the Roman mass is “a condemnable idolatry” (A. 80). The use of religious symbols for personal gain is idolatry. That was precisely the case in sixteenth century Roman Catholicism. Priests abused the Eucharist to consolidate their power, misleading people

3 Estimations vary from 30% to 60% of people who were killed. In addition, many people left the country as refugees.

to depend not on God for their eternal salvation but on the priests. They claimed the power over the ultimate destiny of people, thereby gaining absolute power over those who were utterly dependent on them. This is indeed idolatry – and the catechism labels it as “condemnable idolatry”. It refutes this in the strongest words possible, because it is against everything the gospel of Christ promises: freedom, love, communion with God for the poor and the sinners. The words of answer 80 might seem intolerant in an age of ecumenical tolerance, but these harsh words are spoken on behalf of exploited human beings. The authors of the catechism take their faith seriously. They condemn the exploiters in the name of the gospel.

According to the catechism, people who behave like this should themselves be excluded from the Lord’s Supper: they, “though called Christians, profess unchristian teachings or live unchristian lives” (A. 85). They abuse the name of Christ to justify their unchristian attitude. They exclude people from or include them in the kingdom of heaven based on their own godless interests. The catechism does indeed also exclude people – exactly those people who behave in such an unchristian way. That is not based on an arbitrary decision, but on the gospel itself: thus the preaching of the gospel (Q. 84) takes preference over discipline (Q. 85) in the catechism’s treatment of the keys to locking or unlocking the kingdom of heaven. (The same sequence is found in answer 83.)

6. TERRIBLY ANGRY

In view of these considerations, we can understand why the catechism says that God is terribly angry over human sin (A. 10). God is a just Ruler. He has made his laws to ensure a righteous and safe life in a just society. However, there are people in power, even people who He Himself appointed in their office, who abuse this power, humiliating, exploiting and treating others unjustly. They neglect the good laws and the service of justice. They treat their subjects in the same way as evil dictators. They favour those within their own clique, while others are deprived of their rights.

It is a fitting message that God is terribly angry with such men. What else would we expect from a just Ruler, a righteous God? His anger is *not conflict with* his mercy, but rather the *expression* of it. God loves his people and desires their lives to be peaceful and safe, but He is filled with wrath towards their exploiters. He wants a just society because justice is the essence of righteousness, and righteousness the essence of peace, solicitude and hope.

The consequence of God's justice is expressed in answer 52 on the second coming of Christ. There comfort and punishment go hand in hand:

How does Christ's return "to judge the living and the dead" comfort you?'

'In all distress and persecution, with uplifted head, I confidently await the very judge who has already offered himself to the judgment of God ...

Christ will cast all his enemies and mine into everlasting condemnation.

One might object that the catechism identifies my enemies as God's enemies too easily. From the perspective of the historical context, however, it is obvious that "my enemies" are those villains who destroy human life, steal possessions of others, and rape their daughters and wives. Now these defenceless victims may learn that these villains are not only "my enemies", but God's enemies as well. God will bring them before his judgment seat and condemn them. He will put an end to their violation of his divine laws and human dignity. World history will not have an open ending, but will see justice done for those human beings who suffered the misery of an unjust past. Therefore, God's justice is ultimately comfort.

7. A NATURAL TENDENCY TO HATE GOD AND MY NEIGHBOUR

The catechism is a document of a theology of liberation. The problem of any liberation theology is that it operates merely with the scheme "they-we", which is considered to be identical with the pair "evil-good". The only challenge is to overcome "them". Then justice and peace will be attained.

The Catechism delves further. "They" are a problem indeed, and the whole discourse is coloured by what "they" do. However, "they" are not the main problem. The major problem of my misery is "I". The catechism does not begin with an analysis of what "they" do, but what "I" do – not even "we" as an adversary in a societal conflict, but "I" in my personal responsibility. And this analysis brings to light that "I" am the main problem for "I" have a natural tendency to hate God and my neighbour" (A. 5).

Again, at first sight this seems to be an exaggeration. Of course, nobody is perfect, but to say that we hate God and other people is an overstatement. However, the biblical meaning of "to hate", offers a different perspective. In biblical language, "to hate" often means "to give second place to". To

hate someone is not to give preference to him or her; he or she comes second. A clear example is found in Deuteronomy 21:15-17, which states that a man who has two wives is not allowed to give more of his willed possessions to the children of the loved wife at the expense of those of the “hated” one.⁴ This does not mean that the man is upset with this wife, but merely that she is not his favourite wife.⁵

If we interpret “to hate” in answer 6 in this way, it means that we are inclined to give God and our neighbour second place. Our favourite is the only person that is always written with a capital: “I”. “I” always takes priority over anyone else, including God.

If we take this into consideration, it is no longer possible to think merely in terms of “they” and “we”. First of all, what we have here is primarily the scheme: “they” (God included) and “I”. And precisely when we apply this scheme, we discover the essence of injustice, violence, exploitation and all the other bad things people do. “I” assumes priority and if this priority requires the misuse of God or my neighbour, I will do so. For I have the tendency to use God to further my own ambitions. In the sixteenth century, Roman Catholic priests misused God blatantly. I, too, am inclined to do the same, only more subtly – and thus perhaps with even more peril for my neighbour.

I also have the tendency to use my neighbour to my advantage. When the ultimate question arises: “who must die – he or I?” – my inclination is: he must die. I may even argue that it is my right: the right of self-defense. As soon as the other does not receive priority, the door is open to war and death, if needs be a so called “just war”. Then even my enemies can be put to use in my interest. It is advantageous to have evil opponents. Then it becomes clear how good I am. Many men became great leaders by championing the people against the tyranny and exploitation of their enemies. Thus, even some of the “we” become a means for the ends of the “I”.

The prophet Jeremiah says: “The heart is deceitful above all things, and it is exceedingly corrupt: who can know it?” (WEB). The catechism knows that also – as did Paul when he exclaimed: “What a wretched man I am! Who will deliver me out of the body of this death?” (Rom. 7:24). For “I find this law in me, that while I desire to do good, evil is present” (Rom. 7:21). In the words of the catechism: “even our best works are stained with sin” (A. 62).

4 KJV; ASV. Modern translations already take into account the broader meaning of the Hebrew *sana*’.

5 The Good News Bible translates like this.

Paul's answer is: "I thank God: through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Rom. 7:25). This is also the answer of the catechism. The awareness of my own sin is basic, but more basic is the very first answer: "That I am not my own, but belong – body and soul, in life and in death – to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ." This is the greatest liberation: to be liberated from myself. If human beings could only be liberated from themselves, everything will change, for it is impossible that those who belong to Jesus Christ would not bear the fruit of gratitude (A. 64). They are reborn into a new life: a life in Christ, who gave his life on our behalf. When for Him it was a question of: "he or I" and "she or I", He preferred to die on behalf of the others.

According to the catechism Jesus' death was necessary. The liberation of human beings was only possible if God's justice was satisfied. God cannot give absolution based on arbitrariness or caprice, for He is a just Ruler. Guilt cannot remain unpunished in a just society. It is precisely for that reason that God gave his own Son to become our guarantor. As a guarantor, He is fully accountable and He pays with his life for my fundamental disobedience to God's righteous laws. In this way He liberates me. According to the catechism, the death of Christ is ultimate mercy because it is the ultimate justice. It is even to a greater extent mercy, because Christ consciously took the consequences of our behavior upon himself by becoming our guarantor. He did so, not when we were doing good, but after it had become absolutely clear that our life was totally bankrupt. God shows us mercy because He is so just that He upholds the law that a guarantor is accountable, even if this guarantor is his own son. Because Christ gave his life on our behalf, the Father, as a just judge, cannot but accept this retribution and set us free, for it would be unjust not to accept the sacrifice of Christ as our guarantor. This does not mean that the Father does so unwillingly, for it was He who gave his own Son on our behalf. Both the Father and the Son agreed (as they always agree) to save human beings, even if they had to pay the price themselves. For God is not inclined to hate, but to love: His preference is for human beings, more than for Himself, even for human beings who hate Him. That is mercy which surpasses all understanding.

8. LORD'S DAY 10

If we understand the soteriology of the catechism we can also understand the Lord's Day 10 that Maarten 't Hart put in the pillory.

We must again consider the context. People in the sixteenth century were dispirited through misery. Plague ravaged Europe for several centuries. Wars decimated populations. Young men died on the battlefields

and young women in childbirth. Children died, if not by hunger, then from all kinds of disease. For most people, life was ongoing misery.

What or who is accountable for this? Should we say that God is only caring and thus not responsible for such bad things as cancer and other illnesses, for poverty, for bad days, for drought? Indeed many people, also theologians, deny that God is accountable for suffering in the world. However, if it is not God, who gives cancer and poverty? Who or what does so then?

We can claim that human beings are responsible for poverty and diseases. Certainly, in many instances that is the case. But does it help at all to blame them, if we are unable to overcome them and if the result of the struggle against them is that my sons and husband are killed and that I am compelled to stay in a refugee camp with my raped daughters? World history teaches us what Ecclesiastes after his careful observations concludes:

I returned and saw all the oppressions that are done under the sun:
and I beheld the tears of those who were oppressed, and they had
no comforter; and on the side of their oppressors there was power;
but they had no comforter (Eccl. 4:1f) .

Moreover, there is much evil that exceeds human power, even the power of the powerful who make the world evil. Earthquakes and diseases are beyond human action. What or who then is the cause of disasters? Two answers are traditional in philosophical discourse. One is that bad things happen due to fate. A modern form of this position is that everything is determined by the law of cause and effect. Because we do not know all the causes, we cannot determine the future. Though we can predict more than in the past due to scientific investigations, we do not know what will happen to us tomorrow. The other answer is that things happen to us by mere coincidence. Life is a tombola of the caprices of fortune. One person has good luck, the other bad. Such is life. All that we can conclude from both views is that ultimately we will die.

If life is a misery, as people experienced in the sixteenth century, and as many people still do in the twenty-first century, we can only carry on living, hoping that we will have some good days and fearing that fate will strike us again with misfortune, or even worse, deliver the death blow.

The catechism confesses a different truth. Life is not a dark fate. It is given by God. It is given by God in all its details. It seems pious to blame human beings for evil in order to exonerate God. If, however, these human beings are stronger than I am, and if God does not interfere, I am at the mercy of evil human beings. Then it is better to fall into the hand of God, for his mercies are infinite, than to fall into the hands of men, as

David professes (II Sam. 24:14). That holds true also with regard to fate or fortune. Calvin deals extensively with fate and fortune, but refutes them with reference to God's providence (*Inst.* I,16). That is the background of Lord's Day 10: it is better to be dependent on God than on human powers or on fate or fortune. For many this sounds as if God Himself is a kind of fate. That is the last thing that the Catechism intends to evoke (see also Calvin, *Inst.* I,16,8). Both Calvin and the catechism speak about God's providence because in Christ He is our merciful Father. The Lord's day 10 is part of the section on salvation and not on misery. We confess God as our Father because He is the Father of Jesus Christ.

God is a "strange" father. He did not save his own Son, because He gave priority to his enemies. This involved the sufferings of the cross. We cannot understand the full extent of this event, but we know that it was necessary for our salvation. It is about ultimate love, for "God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16). If we experience hardship in this world, we do not understand why, but we confess that this God rules the universe, and also my little life. Though I do not understand God and I sometimes cry to Him because of my tribulations, I can join Paul in his hymn: "He who didn't spare his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how would he not also with him freely give us all things?" (Rom.8: 32). Even if we do not understand the hardship, disease, and poverty that we receive from his hand, it is better to live with a loving God whom we know as ultimately merciful, than being lost in a silent universe of fate and fortune, or in a screaming world filled with the hymns of the powerful who trample us down. That is from its very beginning the basic belief of the Heidelberg Catechism:

Q. What is your only comfort

in life and in death?

A. That I am not my own,
but belong –

body and soul,
in life and in death —

to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.

He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood,
and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil.

He also watches over me in such a way
that not a hair can fall from my head
without the will of my Father in heaven;
in fact, all things must work together for my salvation.

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

9. CONCLUSION

To conclude: precisely in the phrases that seem to introduce a severe and harsh God, the catechism confesses to be fully dependent on a God who is merciful and whom we can trust. That is our only comfort both in life and death.

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Keywords

Heidelberg Catechism

Wrath of God

God's justice

Providence

Trefwoorde

Heidelbergse Kategismus

Wraak van God

God se geregtigheid

Voorsienigheid