

# Guilt, Grace, and Gratitude

## Lesson 2: Guilt

### Introduction

Questions 1 and 2 (Lord's Day One) introduce the HC. These deal with *comfort* and the *framework for enjoying this comfort*. The order of topics in the HC is thus determined by the interconnection of theological truths to this pastoral concern.

Contrast the Westminster Standards, which deal early on with the doctrine of scripture (WCF 1; SC 2, 3; LC 3, 4, 5). Here the order is shaped by the way in which we know God as revealed.

*Comfort* or *assurance* is important to Protestantism:

- It represents a break with medieval Catholic teaching.
- It was most surely a pastoral problem, given the overall changes in society at the time.
- It is intimately connected to justification by faith.

The *comfort* which the Reformers saw at the heart of the Christian experience is far different from just thinking that God must love you. Today, this attitude can be rooted in the following ideas:

- I am good enough for God.
- God is so loving that he could not possibly not love someone like me.
- I am quite capable of working my way into God's good books.
- All these are what theologians would call *Pelagian* in that they minimize the human dilemma.

By contrast, HC 2 puts the point neatly:

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

*A: Three things: first, how great my sin and misery are; second, how I am set free from all my sins and misery; third, how I am to thank God for such deliverance.*

Thus, true comfort is, according to the HC, rooted in the very antitheses of the above points:

- I can never be good enough in myself for God.
- I am so guilty before him that I deserve nothing at his hands.

- I am utterly dependent upon his saving action.

True comfort does not simply concern the mind to the exclusion of the emotions, nor the emotions to the exclusion of the mind:

- It involves knowledge of an objective state of affairs.
- But it also assumes a confidence, a real, personal relation to these truths which concerns the whole of our being.

## **A Brief Note on Proof-texting**

Some times proof-texts seem too weak or too few or simply too irrelevant to carry the theological weight attached to them. We need to remember:

- Most confessions and catechisms of the Reformation (including the HC and the Westminster Standards) were written first and then had the proof-texts added **after** composition.
- The Reformation notion of the sufficiency and normativity of scripture did not mean that they 'just had their Bibles.'
- The Reformers rejection of Roman notions of extra-scriptural tradition did not mean that they did not have a high respect for the creedal, theological, and exegetical traditions of the church.
- The authors saw their work rooted in the background of exegetical discussion.
- The proof-texts act as flags to which strands of the exegetical/theological tradition are germane to the formulation of the relevant section in the confessions or catechisms.
- It is far different to the approach either of modern fundamentalism or of much modern biblical scholarship in its historical and ecclesiastical sensitivity.

## **Guilt**

Questions 3 to 11 deal with Guilt.

Fred Klooster prefers to talk of **misery**, as guilt is not the main theme of the section but rather the misery which sin brings into human life

### **Lord's Day Two:**

- Qu. 3: The law as giving knowledge of our misery.
- Qu. 4: The law is summarized in Mt. 22.
- Qu. 5: No-one can perfectly fulfill the law.

By starting discussion of human nature in terms of the law, and by making this the basic starting point for elaborating on human nature and salvation, the HC adopts a typical **Lutheran** structure.

Compare the HC with Luther's comment in his synopsis of Galatians (2<sup>nd</sup> Commentary, 1535 – the one that so influenced John Bunyan):

Therefore when I see that a man is sufficiently contrite, oppressed by the Law, terrified by sin, and thirsting for comfort, then it is time for me to take the Law and active righteousness from his sight and to set forth before him, through the Gospel, the passive righteousness which excludes Moses and the Law and shows the promise of Christ, who came for the afflicted and for sinners. Here a man is raised up again and gains hope.<sup>1</sup>

### **Lord's Day Three:**

- Qu. 6: The perfection of the original creation of humanity, in God's image and intended to know and love God.
- Qu. 7: The fall of Adam and Eve so poisons human nature that we are all born sinners.
- Qu. 8: We can thus do nothing good unless born again by the Spirit.

There are a couple of points of interest here:

- The HC makes no mention of the covenant of works. This is really of simple chronological significance, as the terminology is not developed until the later sixteenth century. Nothing said here is incompatible with the covenant of works.
- The personal, first-person language is very evident. This is not abstract talk about abstract truths; the catechumen is personally involved in the content of the answers.

### **What is total depravity?**

Canons of Dordt (Third and Fourth Point, Art. 3) on Total Inability:

Therefore, all people are conceived in sin and are born children of wrath, unfit for any saving good, inclined to evil, dead in their sins, and slaves to sin; without the grace of the regenerating Holy Spirit they are neither willing nor able to return to God, to reform their distorted nature, or even to dispose themselves to such reform.

The Canons go on to stress that humans retain some knowledge of God and morality, just not enough to enable a saving knowledge of God.

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<sup>1</sup>Luther, Martin: Pelikan, Jaroslav Jan (Hrsg.) ; Oswald, Hilton C. (Hrsg.) ; Lehmann, Helmut T. (Hrsg.): *Luther's Works, Vol. 26 : Lectures on Galatians, 1535, Chapters 1-4*. Saint Louis : Concordia Publishing House, 1999, c1963 (Luther's Works 26), S. 26:7

Qu. 60-61 make it clear that we remain totally depraved, in the sense that our natures are still pervaded by corruption and we remain, dependent upon God's grace and Christ's righteousness even after believing. This is crucial for understanding the nature of Christian experience, as indicated in Qu. 114:

Qu. 114: *But can those converted to God obey these commandments perfectly?*  
A: *No. In this life even the holiest have only a small beginning of this obedience. Nevertheless, with all seriousness of purpose, they do begin to live according to all, not only some, of God's commandments.*

### **Lord's Day Four**

- Qu. 9: The justice of demanding that which we cannot do.
- Qu. 10: The certainty of punishment for our rebellion.
- Qu. 11: God is merciful, but his mercy cannot ignore the demands of justice.

Some comments are in order:

- The HC assumes the classic distinction between ability and responsibility. We are responsible to fulfill the law; and unable to do so through succumbing to temptation.
- These questions set the stage for the necessity of a mediator and lay the foundations for arguing that he must be both God and human.

### **Some More Reading:**

Joel R. Beeke and Sinclair B. Ferguson, *Reformed Confessions Harmonized* (Baker). A tabulated comparison of the Second Helvetic Confession, Belgic Confession, Heidelberg Catechism, Second Helvetic Confession, and Westminster Standards. It is very helpful in showing the depth of common theological ground between these various documents.

The following web resources and sites have been brought to my attention (with thanks to Dennis Bratcher, who provides the commentary on each):

<http://www.lulu.com/content/490702>

We All Believe...

These are notes on the 37 Articles of the Belgic Confession of Faith suitable for a high school Reformed religion class or a Christian study group.

Print: \$8.00

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A Living Faith

An introduction to the Heidelberg Catechism for young teens (aged 12-13).

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[www.telusplanet.net/public/inhpubl/webip/prod05.htm](http://www.telusplanet.net/public/inhpubl/webip/prod05.htm)

the above is a book site for many materials written by those affiliated with the Vrijgemaakte, Canadian Reformed and Free Reformed Churches of Australia

Annotations to the Heidelberg Catechism by J. Van Bruggen

John A. Hawthorne in Reformed Theological Journal: . . . The individual Christian would find it a constructive way to employ part of the Sabbath day by working through the lesson that is set for each Lord's Day. No one can study this volume without increasing his knowledge of truth and being made to worship and adore the God of all grace. This book will help every minister in the instruction of his people, both young and not so young, every parent in the task of catechizing and is commended to every Christian for personal study.

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