

Reformation 500 Week 1: Heidelberg Catechism, Questions 1-2

The Heidelberg Catechism, published in 1563, was the work of two men, Zacharias Ursinus (a seminary professor) and Casper Olevianus (a minister) who lived in Heidelberg, Germany. They were asked by Frederick III, a ruler of a German state called the Palatinate, to prepare a catechism “to help the churches in his land to be *Reformed* in their doctrine rather than Roman Catholic or Lutheran or Baptist” (Rev. Norman Jones, *Study Helps on the Heidelberg Catechism*). Frederick “wanted a book that showed the heart of the gospel to men, women, boys, and girls who needed the comfort that only God can give” (William Boekestein, *The Quest for Comfort: The Story of the Heidelberg Catechism*).

Question 1: “What is your only comfort in life and in death? That I, with body and soul, both in life and in death, am not my own, but belong to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ, who with His precious blood has fully satisfied for all my sins, and redeemed me from all the power of the devil; and so preserves me that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, that all things must work together for my salvation. Wherefore, by His Holy Spirit, He also assures me of eternal life, and makes me heartily willing and ready from now on to live unto Him.”

The catechism begins with the clear and simple testimony of a pardoned soul: the only comfort in life and in death is belonging to the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who loves us so much that He shed His blood for us on the cross. He fully paid for all our sins, so that we are forgiven of all our sins, and adopted into God’s family as His beloved children. The Holy Spirit lives in us to assure us that we are God’s children (Romans 8:15), and that “*nothing* shall be able to separate us from the love of God” (Romans 8:39); “whether we live, or die, we are the Lord’s” (Romans 14:8). The Holy Spirit also makes us willing to live for Him who died for us (2 Corinthians 5:15).

Question 2: “How many things are necessary for you to know, that in this comfort you may live and die happily? Three things: First, the greatness of my sin and misery. Second, how I am redeemed from all my sins and misery. Third, how I am to be thankful to God for such redemption.”

Based on the three main sections of the book of Romans, Question 2 gives the three main things every true Christian knows: (1) the greatness of their sin and misery; (2) how they have been saved from their sin and misery; and (3) how to show themselves thankful to God for salvation. Every Christian knows sin, salvation, and service – *in that order*. Sin, like a terrible disease, makes us seek the Physician’s remedy of salvation; which produces a life of thankful service.

The rest of the Catechism will explain these 3 things:

- **sin** (Questions 3-11)
- **salvation** (Questions 12-85)
- **service** (Questions 86-129)

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REFORMATION 500 WEEK 1: JOHN WYCLIFFE

This year we join the reformed family of churches throughout the world in celebrating the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, which began on October 31, 1517, when Martin Luther nailed his *95 Theses Against Indulgences* to the bulletin board on the door of the Castle church in Wittenberg, Germany. This was the beginning of the church's return to the Bible and its gospel of salvation by grace alone.

Preparation for Reformation

Martin Luther was not the church's first reformer. In the latter part of the Middle Ages there arose many individuals who criticized the doctrine and government of the Roman Catholic Church. One of the most important was John Wycliffe (1320-1384).

Wycliffe was born in England in the year 1320. He studied at the university of Oxford, and later became professor in that institution. Wycliffe believed the plague known as the Black Death was the judgment of God on a faithless people and a corrupt church. He charged his audience to turn back to the Bible and to God in repentance. Catholic doctrine taught that the teachings of the church were equal to the Bible, but Wycliffe insisted that the Bible, and the Bible alone, is the only infallible authority; and, therefore, it is superior to the Church, its hierarchy, and its traditions.

Wycliffe taught that individuals need to establish a direct and personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ. No priest or pope could serve as a mediator between God and man. Wycliffe denounced the worship of images, relics, the sale of indulgences, masses for the dead, processions, and pilgrimages. Wycliffe also denounced the Pope as Antichrist; and he condemned the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation, the belief that at the Lord's Supper the bread and wine become the literal body and blood of Jesus.

The Bible at that time was written in Latin and could not be read by the people. In order that Christians in England might be able to read the Bible for themselves, Wycliffe translated it into the English language. He was the first to translate the Bible in the language of the people. Since few people could read, Wycliffe tackled this obstacle through a massive literacy campaign to teach people to read God's word without the need of the clergy. Wycliffe's followers called the "Lollards" carried his teaching and the newly translated Bible into many parts of England.

The pope and the clergy "did all they could to destroy Wycliffe. But a large portion of the English people and among them many powerful nobles were in hearty sympathy with the reformer. These nobles protected him so that he did not fall into the hands of his persecutors. Wycliffe died in peace on the last day of the year 1384" (Kuiper, *The Church in History*, 144).

Because of his influence, **Wycliffe helped to prepare the way for the Reformation**, and for this reason has been called the "Morning Star of the Reformation."

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