



We remain beginners

Little children like to grow up. Children of God long for growth in faith. You can expect this of Christians. But what are their expectations allowed to be? Do children of God have to presume that they will always remain little, always remain beginners? Does not the Heidelberg Catechism say that even the most advanced have no more than a small beginning of obedience in this life? Words like this do not seem to be very stimulating. They do not seem to be the thing to motivate you to enter into a life with God. Instead they sound rather frustrating.

The spirit of Pentecost?

Every year, the Christian church celebrates the feast of Pentecost. It is the feast wherein the work of the Holy Spirit receives the central place. We will concentrate on the question of how far the Holy Spirit wishes to bring us.

The first concerns the question: what exactly is a Christian allowed to expect from the power of the Holy Spirit. Should we not put more emphasis than we have often done in the past upon the great things which Christ's Spirit wants to do in our lives? Do we allow ourselves to be rendered paralyzed in advance by thinking and saying, "Well, We are all no more than weak sinners after all, aren't we? We can never amount to anything." If the starting point of your reasoning is that you will always be stuck in the minimum groove, will your life then not become a self-fulfilling prophecy? Besides, we must not proceed from what we see in ourselves and in others, but we are allowed to hope for what God has promised! Just wait and see: if you start to hope for more, and pray more often, you will be given more.

True or not?

The second question is this: how does the Spirit of Christ want to work on us? Are we often not too legalistic, too 'do this and do that' orientated? Under pressure from this forceful obligation that we must show thankfulness, do we not make things far too difficult for ourselves? Is it not a relief, a liberating discovery, when you find you do not have to do anything yourself? And that you do not need to work towards being an obedient person by your own efforts and exertions, but that your sanctification is also the work of Christ in us from beginning to end? But does this thought not contain a dangerous hidden snag - namely, that you adopt an attitude of waiting, of resignation and passivity?

How great

The Heidelberg Catechism (HC) is the book which we have used more intensively than any other for hundreds of years, in catechism room and church hall, for the purpose of the growth of faith of young and old. You could call it the course for spiritual growth within the reformed Churches. We will start with this book.

What is the central core, the essence, of the comfort which is handed to me in the HC? Not what I do; not what I have; not what I am able; not what I expect; not what I feel; not what I experience; not what I have undergone, or will undergo, in the way of growth; but what I am. My wealth consists of this: that I am precious. Thanks to Him who bought me for the highest price (LD 1). After such a start, the HC causes me to be horrified about myself: although I am completely

Christ's, by nature I am inclined to hate God and my neighbour (Q & A 5). The HC does not say this about the unrepentant, but about the believer. It is striking that the growth-thought' is first introduced in the HC in connection with the increasing of our guilt: every day we increase our guilt (Q & A 13). Is this typical of the HC?

It appears to be.

For it is true that the catechism has this humbling thought flowing through it from beginning to end: I am a sinner, and for the time being, I will remain one too. From LD 2 up to and including LD 52 you become deeply aware of the remaining weaknesses of God's children. LD 2 already addresses me at the point of my sinful nature; LD 52 still keeps on saying:

In ourselves we are so weak that we cannot stand even for a moment. Moreover, our sworn enemies - the devil, the world, and our own flesh do not cease to attack us (Q & A 127).

And shortly before this the HC teaches us to see ourselves as '*poor sinners*', who pray: do not impute to us any of our transgressions (!), nor the wickedness which can still always be found in us (Q & A 126). I am still always inclined to all evil (Q & A 60).

However, I may completely trust that any '*remaining weakness*' is covered by the suffering and death of Christ (Q & A 81).

In all this, we may not forget that LD 1 was the door by which we entered the HC. The dark and gloomy sounds that we heard do not stand by themselves. They are connected to my happiness. The intent is that I will live a happy life by means of this comfort. And die happily (Q & A 2). It is with an eye to our happiness that I am first required to realize '*how great my sin and misery are*'. How great! This opening of LD 1 is worked out throughout the whole of the catechism. For I have to know, thankfully, how great God's grace is.

How small

Does the catechism describe, over against this, how great the fruits of thankfulness, which will grow in my heart, will be? No. Over against the 'how-great-is-my-guilt' the HC does not speak about the 'how-great-is-my-new-obedience'. The HC speaks in a strikingly sober manner about a small beginning. Even the most advanced have no more than a small beginning of this obedience in this life (Q & A 114).

Besides this '*no more than*', the HC uses an expression which sounds a great deal more positive: '*now already*'. Already now I may feel in my heart the beginning of eternal joy (Q & A 58)! Already now we are raised up to a new life by the power of Christ (Q & A 45). This is the work of the Holy Spirit. There comes an all-decisive new beginning which changes everything.

Within the context of the fourth commandment, the HC also sees something beautiful starting in our lives. Because I allow the Lord to work in me through his Spirit, I begin the eternal sabbath in this life (Q & A 103). We do not take out an insurance, so to speak, so that we are covered for a future eternity, but it is in this life that it begins.

In conclusion, we can assert: the HC strongly emphasizes the remaining weaknesses of those who are born again through the Spirit of Christ. When it talks about our new obedience, the HC sees God's children as beginners. The catechism: a starter's book for people who remain beginners. Nowhere near everything has been said with this, however. But this is where we must start. Besides the guilt laden '*no more than*' we also hear the surprising '*already now*'.

Why?

This is the first harvest we collect from out of the confessions. It seems to be a rather poor one. Especially when you think of Pentecost, the feast of abundance(!). Then a feeling of

disappointment can enter your heart. Therefore it would be wise to ask the question: what is the reason for this?

There is at least this great discovery of the reformers at the bottom of it all: God does not justify righteous people, but sinners. He does not acquit people who have gone a long way along the road of their sanctification, but He acquits criminals, evildoers. Besides, saved people also remain completely dependent upon grace, even after their conversion. Grace not only fits in the picture at the time that we come to faith. No, the word grace becomes increasingly larger during the course of my life. That word '*grace*' grows, also when I have already been a churchgoer and believer for many years. Grace not only dominates the start of my life with God, but also what follows. This grace starts to mean more and more to you. Simultaneously, as you say "*there is no more than a mere beginning of obedience*", Christ starts to mean more to you.

In the emphasis that the HC places on the remaining weaknesses of God's children, you therefore detect a resistance against Rome's approach. My good works do not contribute to my deliverance at all. Herein you also detect a resistance against (Anabaptist) convictions. With my good works, I do not attain a particular grade or state of holiness, let alone of perfection. The reformation taught people, also converted people, to think little of themselves and to think 'big' when it comes to God's compassion.

The last words which Luther wrote down in Eisleben before his death (1546) sounded like this: "*We are beggars. That is the truth.*" This is what Luther said - and may I not count him among the holiest? - at the end of his life, at the end of an impressive process of spiritual growth.

Unmotivating?

Well, it all sounds all right, but is this not terribly unmotivating? Does this not crush all incentive to fight sin? Every year many young people hope to profess their faith. Will it not be frustrating to say to our young people: "Do your best to serve the Lord your whole life long, but realize this, that even those who display the most spiritual growth, have not managed any more than a small beginning?" Does it not squash all idealism in advance? A highly deflating and pedagogically irresponsible approach?

But - is it not just possible that the aim of the HC is to prevent any frustrations? In its reserved way of speaking about '*a (small) beginning*', there could be evidence of a great deal of wise caution. Evidence of insight into Scripture and insight into the human heart. Younger and older believers are confronted with questions as big as life itself about life and faith, young people who make profession of their faith when they are eighteen may suddenly find themselves bombarded with questions five years later: why do I not possess more joy of faith? Why do I still doubt so many times? Why can I not control so many of my thoughts? This should not happen to me, child of God, should it? I should be able to tackle anything with God's help, should I not? But you would not want to count all those who have the feeling that they cannot face up to any more of life.

"What is happening to that great power of faith, the power of the Holy Spirit, in my life? My experiences are often so out of step with this fact"

Besides, am I really growing so fast? How often am I not troubled by the same sins again and again? The alcohol, the fierce temper, the laziness, the passions, the petty mindedness, the short fuse, the greed which I had to fight against twenty years ago, I still have to fight all the time. And I am still being tossed to and fro between belonging to Christ and belonging to the world. For a great deal of this world attracts me.

It is then a great relief when we say to each other, aloud, and within the congregation, "You are not the only one who is often tangled up with the power of evil" It gives you a basic feeling of security and it creates openness. In those times of little faith and little obedience, you can feel lonely. "Am I the only one who can be so depressed? Am I the only one who often has the feeling I have made a mess of things? Am I the only one who has lost all hope at times?" No, you are not. What the HC

teaches about '*a beginning*' teaches us to be humble, but not to despair. No matter how far gone you are, you may always start anew! The comfort of Lord's Day 1 can sometimes be a target under fire, when you hear some people speak about the beautiful things which God's Spirit has done to them. It would not be good to sweep these beautiful things aside as if they were rubbish because they threaten our peace of mind. However, they can be very frustrating for others: 'I do not have such a wonderful story to tell and a powerful growth through God's Spirit has not been my portion in life. Am I really a child of God?'

Do not let it unbalance you. I would point out all that is humbling, but also encouraging, in the words we say aloud in the HC, that none of us will succeed in getting any further than a mere beginning before the countenance of God, and measured by the yardstick of His perfect holiness. Among countless believers since 1563, these words have sparked a recognition of what lies in their own heart. Should we rise above such an awareness and grow out of it in 1997?

Comma

Yet we make a great mistake if we get bogged down here and do not go any further. We interrupted the catechism at a certain point to let this fact sink in that those, who wish to grow spiritually, must remain little.

But that is not the end of the matter.

For example, Lord's Day 44 does not say '*a small beginning*' fullstop, that's it. There is as it were a comma between this thought and the next. This beginning is a beginning that proceeds to change our lives in every aspect. We begin to live according to all the commandments of God. Not with a lukewarm, shallow and sloppy attitude either. It proceeds from an '*earnest purpose*'. The desire sits deep down in our hearts. Talk about longing for sanctification!

The desire sits deep down in our hearts and covers a broad area. Your eye looks into all directions; you begin to live according to all God's commandments.

And Q & A 115 adds more weight to the argument: *we cannot do without the preaching about the law, for this motivates us to pray constantly for the grace of the Holy Spirit, in order to be renewed more and more after the image of God. "More and more."* As beginners we cannot wait to grow. Let us beware that we do not cultivate a one track mind, having our eyes solely on the fact that in our lives with Christ we are only always beginners.

Not the beginning, but the final aim, our future perfection, is allowed to be our focus. Pentecost means: the Spirit of Christ does great things. 'We will never amount to anything'?? Not at all! We will be perfect in every way. Beginners are allowed to grow towards that goal already now.

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