



## The Work of the Holy Spirit upon the Church

So far our survey of the *Heidelberg Catechism* has shown that the Spirit of Christ is central to its structure and content, as he is presented as intimately united to Jesus Christ and to the Christian. In light of his work upon the Christian, *Heidelberg Catechism* commentator, Eugene Heideman, once again, mistakenly concludes concerning the theology of the *Catechism*:

*It must be noticed that in this exposition of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit the Catechism easily leads one to the conclusion that the work of the Holy Spirit takes place largely in the secret places of the heart. In its emphasis upon the individual heart to the neglect of other aspects of the work of the Holy Spirit, the Catechism both showed itself to be still closely bound to the spirit of the mysticism of the Middle Ages, and opened the way to the abuses of pietism which arose in the following centuries and continues in many places today.<sup>1</sup>*

Of course this leads to the irony that Charismatics such as Jack Hayford believe we underemphasize the personal work of the Holy Spirit, while Heideman believes that the *Catechism* overemphasizes his personal work! As we conclude our examination of the content of the *Heidelberg Catechism* we will see that these are both mistaken notions. The former is incorrect for reasons already explained in the previous article,<sup>2</sup> while the latter misses the plethora of material in the *Catechism* in which the Holy Spirit is bound up with the external means of grace – the public preaching of the Word and the Sacraments of Christ's Church.

### Preaching

The *Catechism* makes a vital link between the work of the Spirit and preaching. Question and Answer 65 speak of the origin of true faith as the work of the Holy Spirit 'by the preaching of the holy Gospel' (see also Q&A 2.1).<sup>3</sup> Here the *Catechism's* primary author, Zacharius Ursinus, utilizes the classical categories of causality in saying that the Spirit is the efficient cause of faith while the preaching of the gospel is the instrumental cause.<sup>4</sup> This tells us that while the Holy Spirit is the sole creator of faith, he uses the means of the Word in creating this faith. In saying this, we can see that the Word and Spirit are so united that the Word can be said to be the external form of the Spirit, while the Spirit can be said to be the internal power of the Word.

Moving into Question and Answer 67, the *Catechism* asks,

*Are both these, then, the Word and the Sacraments, designed to direct our faith to the sacrifice of Christ on the cross as the only ground of our salvation?*

In speaking of the preached Word the *Catechism* answers,

*Yes, truly; **for the Holy Ghost teaches in the Gospel** ... that our whole salvation stands in the one sacrifice of Christ made for us on the cross' (Emphasis added).*

We find in these words a commentary on what the *Catechism* later describes as the 'lively preaching' of the Word (Q&A 98). Preaching is the living Word of the Holy Spirit to his church. As the apostle Paul says, the preaching of Christ and him crucified (1 Cor. 1:23; 2:2) is preaching that is not in 'plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power' (1 Cor. 2:4). The Holy Spirit operates upon men's hearts through the voice of the minister and through the sacramental elements of water, bread, and wine.<sup>5</sup>

## **The Sacraments in General**

These sacraments, baptism and the Lord's Supper (Q&A 68), are used by the same Holy Spirit primarily to confirm the faith which he has already created in the hearts of believers. This is taught by Questions and Answers 65 and 67.<sup>6</sup> Q&A 67 teaches us that the Holy Spirit condescends to work through the ordinary. According to the *Heidelberg Catechism*, then, the mission-minded, evangelistic church that Eugene Heideman laments is not sufficiently envisioned in the *Catechism*, is found in the church that preaches the gospel in a lively way (Q&A 98) and that faithfully administers the sacraments (Q&A 65). The Spirit is found in the church that is filled with the preached Word, the waters of baptism, and the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper. Through these means Christ's mission of bringing the evangel to the world becomes the church's mission. Surely this is no damp, passionless, insufficient doctrine of the Holy Spirit.

## **Baptism**

Turning to the sacraments in particular, we see an indisputable fact about the Holy Spirit in the *Heidelberg Catechism*. The Spirit is mentioned in *all* six questions and answers devoted to the doctrine of baptism. What this means is that baptism is no mere symbol, nor is it a work whereby sins are forgiven just by placing water on someone *ex opere operato*, but is a means of the work of the Spirit in our lives.

Question 69 asks, '*How is it signified and sealed unto thee in holy Baptism that thou hast part in the one sacrifice of Christ on the cross?*'

*Thus: that Christ instituted this outward washing with water, and has joined therewith this promise, that I am washed with his blood and Spirit from the pollution of my soul, that is, from all my sins, as certainly as I am washed outwardly with water whereby commonly the filthiness of the body is taken away.*

The outward sign of water, which in human terms washes the body, signifies the parallel inner reality of the cleansing of the soul by Christ's blood *and* Spirit. Lyle Bierma describes Olevianus' parallelism between the outer and inner action of baptism, saying:

*It is the Holy Spirit who purifies, not the water. But he will go so far as to say that the water of baptism is more than mere water (schlecht wasser), for the water is so bound to the promise of God that the physical cleansing becomes if not the instrument at least the occasion for the spiritual cleansing. In every baptism there are two parallel baptizers, two baptizands, and two washings. As the outer self is washed with the water by the minister, the inner self is washed with the blood of the Christ by the Holy Spirit. Physical baptism is still only a sign or outward testimony of spiritual baptism, but the two events do coincide and are bound together in the relationship between promise and sign.<sup>7</sup>*

Question and Answer 70 go on to explain this doctrine, asking, '*What is it to be washed with the blood and Spirit of Christ?*'

*It is to have the forgiveness of sins from God, through grace, for the sake of Christ's blood, which he shed for us in his sacrifice on the cross; and also to be renewed by the Holy Ghost, and sanctified to be members of Christ, that so we may more and more die unto sin, and lead holy and unblameable lives.*

We notice here again the theme of the double benefit (*duplex beneficium*) of Jesus Christ in justification and sanctification.<sup>8</sup> Baptism is an outward sign and seal that Christ's blood justifies, while the Holy Spirit sanctifies us by putting to death our sin and bringing us to new life.

Where, though, do the Scriptures promise this? Question 71 is clearly written so that catechumens will be able to locate this doctrine in Scripture. The answer gives a quotation from several texts of Scripture (Matt. 28:19; Titus 3:5; Acts 22:16). Especially in reference to Titus 3:5, the *Catechism* explains this washing as the work of the Holy Spirit. This renewal spoken of in the *Catechism* was

incorporated into the 'Form of Baptism' of the Palatinate Liturgy, which explains what it means to be baptized 'in the name of the Holy Ghost':

*...we are assured that the Holy Ghost will be the Teacher and Comforter of us and our children to all eternity, and make us true members of the body of Christ. And further that we have fellowship with all His benefits in common with all the members of His Church, so that our sins shall be remembered no more forever, and that the corruptions and infirmities, that still cling to us may be continually mortified and a new life be commenced, which finally in the resurrection, (when our body shall be made like unto the glorious body of Christ), shall be completely revealed in us.<sup>9</sup>*

At this point the *Catechism* takes a polemic turn, distancing itself from Rome: 'Is, then, the outward washing of water itself the washing away of sins?' (Q&A 72) This question is succinctly answered, 'No; for only the blood of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit cleanse us from all sin.'<sup>10</sup>

In Question and Answer 73 this point is pressed, no doubt to impress upon catechumens and those listening to catechetical sermons, 'Why, then, doth the Holy Ghost call Baptism the washing of regeneration and the washing away of sins?' The answer:

*God speaks thus not without great cause: namely, not only to teach us thereby that like as the filthiness of the body is taken away by water, so our sins also are taken away by the blood and Spirit of Christ; but much more, that by this divine pledge and token he may assure us that we are as really washed from our sins spiritually as our bodies are washed with water.*

Although we know that it is the Holy Spirit who washes us from our sins, he interchanges the sign and the thing signified when he speaks. The Spirit does this because it is 'through the use of the signs' that our faith is confirmed. Therefore the waters of baptism are the pledge that our sins are forgiven.<sup>11</sup>

The final question and answer on the topic of baptism is meant to show the catholicity of the Reformed Faith by distancing itself from Anabaptism on the subject of whether infants also should be baptized. Even here the *Catechism* mentions the Holy Spirit, saying that the 'sign of the covenant' is to be given to children of believers:

*...since they, as well as their parents, belong to the covenant and people of God, and both redemption from sin and the Holy Ghost, who works faith, are through the blood of Christ promised to them no less than to their parents. (Q&A 74)*

'The Holy Spirit speaks to the children of believers through baptism in a manner adapted to their capacity' to teach them that they belong to the covenant of God.<sup>12</sup>

## **The Lord's Supper**

With its presentation of the holy Supper the *Heidelberg Catechism* uses language meant to unite Zurich, Geneva, and the Melancthonians. To do this the technical jargon of the 'mode' of Christ's 'real' presence is absent. Instead, the role of the Holy Spirit is emphasized in three key questions and answers. In Question 76 we are asked, 'What is it to eat the crucified body and drink the shed blood of Christ?':

*It is not only to embrace with a believing heart all the sufferings and death of Christ, and thereby to obtain the forgiveness of sins and life eternal, but moreover, also, to be so united more and more to his sacred body by the Holy Ghost, who dwells both in Christ and in us, that although he is in heaven, and we on the earth, we are nevertheless flesh of his flesh and bone of his bones, and live and are governed forever by one Spirit, as members of the same body are governed by one soul.*

To eat and drink Christ is not only to believe, as Zwingli consistently pointed out, quoting St Augustine,<sup>13</sup> but also to be united to Christ's body by the Holy Spirit. The inherent polemical note

must be recognized here against Rome and Gnesio-Lutheranism ('true' Lutherans, as opposed to the followers of Philip Melancthon), as it is said to be the Holy Spirit who unites partakers to the body of Christ, not the eating of the corporal presence of Christ in the bread and wine.<sup>14</sup> It was the role of the Holy Spirit in the Lord's Supper that distinguished Calvin's doctrine of the Supper from the Roman and Gnesio-Lutheran doctrine and that is followed by the *Heidelberg Catechism*.<sup>15</sup> In the words of B. A. Gerrish, *'The catechism explicitly teaches a communion with the body of Christ and, like Calvin, makes the Holy Spirit the bond of union between Christ's body in heaven and ourselves on earth.'*<sup>16</sup>

This emphasis of the work of the Holy Spirit in the Lord's Supper is also expressed in Question and Answer 79, which ask, *'Why, then, doth Christ call the bread his body, and the cup his blood, or the New Testament in his blood; and St Paul, the communion of the body and the blood of Christ?'*

*Christ speaks thus not without great cause: namely, not only to teach us thereby that like as bread and wine sustain this temporal life, so also his crucified body and shed blood are the true meat and drink of our souls unto life eternal; but much more, by this visible sign and pledge to assure us that we are as really partakers of his true body and blood, through the working of the Holy Ghost, as we receive by the mouth of the body these holy tokens in remembrance of him; and that all his sufferings and obedience are as certainly our own as if we had ourselves suffered and done all in our own persons.*

Again it is emphasized that Christ is received not by mere eating, *contra* Rome and Lutheranism, nor by simply remembering, *contra* Zwingli, but through the Holy Spirit's powerful and mysterious work. Finally this is expressed in the controversial Question and Answer 80, which asks, *'What difference is there between the Lord's Supper and the Popish Mass?'* The answer, in part, is that we are *'ingrafted into Christ'* by the Holy Spirit, not by eating and drinking transformed bread and wine.

As this section of our essay has shown, the *Catechism* does not teach that the Spirit works directly upon the soul of the believer without the means of grace, as Pentecostalism, mysticism, and pietism do teach. Instead, it is clear that the *Heidelberg Catechism* emphasizes that the Holy Spirit works in the church through its external means of preaching and sacraments.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion what we have seen is that, far from presenting a bare outline of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, minimizing his Person and work for the mission and life of the church and the Christian, the *Heidelberg Catechism* is a catechetical presentation of the Person and work of the Holy Spirit from beginning to end. The authors clearly utilized the doctrine of the Person and work of the Spirit as an organizing part of its structure. Furthermore the *Catechism* teaches throughout that the Holy Spirit is that personal, intimate, comforting bond of union between Christ, the anointed One, and his people who share in his anointing. The Spirit of God permeates question after question of the *Heidelberg Catechism*, so much so that we can say that there is no doctrine in the *Catechism* from which the Holy Spirit is absent; therefore, there is no doctrine of the Reformed Faith from which the Holy Spirit may be absent.

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- <sup>1</sup> Eugene P. Heideman, 'God the Holy Spirit', in *Guilt, Grace, and Gratitude: A Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, ed. Donald J. Bruggink (New York: The Half Moon Press, 1963), p. 114 (not to be confused with the Banner of Truth publication with a similar title by George W. Bethune).
- <sup>2</sup> Daniel R. Hyde, 'A Catechism on the Holy Spirit-3: The Work of the Holy Spirit upon the Christian.' *Banner of Truth*, Issue 53 5, April 2008, pp. 1-9.
- <sup>3</sup> All references to the *Heidelberg Catechism* are from *The Creeds of Christendom*, ed. Philip Schaff, rev. David S. Schaff (1931; Grand Rapids: Baker, reprinted 1996), 3307-55.
- <sup>4</sup> *The Commentary of Dr Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism*, trans. G. W. Williard (1852; Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, reprinted 5985), p. 340.
- <sup>5</sup> Cf. *Second Helvetic Confession*, Ch. 1.4: 'Wherefore when this Word of God is now preached in the church by preachers lawfully called, we believe that the very Word of God is preached, and received of the faithful.' Schaff, *Creeds*, 3:832.
- <sup>6</sup> Ursinus, *Commentary*, p. 352
- <sup>7</sup> Lyle D. Bierma, *German Calvinism in the Confessional Age: The Covenant Theology of Caspar Olevianus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), p. 87.
- <sup>8</sup> Ursinus, *Commentary*, pp. 358, 361.
- <sup>9</sup> John H. A. Bomberger, 'The Old Palatinate Liturgy of 1563.' *The Mercersburg Review* 2 (May 1850): 280. This form was brought into the Dutch Reformed Churches through Petrus Dathenus, the minister of the Dutch refugee congregation in Frankenthal and later preacher in the court of Frederick III. This form from his 1566 *Psalter* is found in 'Baptism of Infants: Form Number in *Psalter Hymnal* (Grand Rapids: Christian Reformed Church, 1976), p. 123, and reads:  
 ...the Holy Spirit assures us, by this holy sacrament that He will dwell in us, and sanctify us to be members of Christ, imparting to us that which we have in Christ, namely, the washing away of our sins and the daily renewing of our lives, till we shall finally be presented without spot among the assembly of the elect in life eternal.
- <sup>10</sup> Here Ursinus explains the use of 'sacramental' language. *Commentary*, pp. 364-65.
- <sup>11</sup> Ursinus, *Commentary*, p. 365.
- <sup>12</sup> Ursinus, *Commentary*, p. 366.
- <sup>13</sup> 'On the Lord's Supper', in *Zwingli and Bullinger*, ed. G. W. Bromiley, The Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1953), pp. 197-8.
- <sup>14</sup> Ursinus, *Commentary*, p. 382, 406-15; cf. Lyle D. Bierma, 'The Sources and Theological Orientation of the Heidelberg Catechism', in *An Introduction to the Heidelberg Catechism*, ed. Lyle D. Bierma, Texts & Studies in Reformation & Post-Reformation Thought (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2.005), pp.75-80.
- <sup>15</sup> Lyle D. Bierma, 'What Hath Wittenberg to Do with Heidelberg? Philip Melanchthon and the Heidelberg Catechism', in *Melanchthon in Europe: His Work and Influence Beyond Wittenberg*, ed. Karin Maag, Texts & Studies in Reformation & Post-Reformation Thought (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), p. 112.16
- <sup>16</sup> B. A. Gerrish, *The Old Protestantism and the New: Essays on the Reformation Heritage* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 125.