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Experiencing Our Only Comfort: A Post-Reformation Refocus in the Heidelberg Catechism

Abstract

Last year marked the 450th anniversary of the publication of the Heidelberg Catechism. In celebration of this momentous occasion and as a reminder of the contemporary applicability of this highly-regarded confessional document, this essay examines the earliest and most complete Puritan commentary extant: that of second-generation Puritan thinker William Ames (1576–1633), protégé of William Perkins (1558–1602), the “father” of the Puritan movement. We examine methodological considerations and two topical issues that arise when the venerated Catechism is placed in the hands of a practically oriented, post-Reformation divine for whom theology was none other than “living to God”: *Theologia est doctrina deo vivendi*. It will become evident that this package of catechetical instruction carries as much—perhaps more—practical relevance today as when it was first authored four and a half centuries ago.

Keywords

Heidelberg Catechism, William Ames, Puritan movement, Reformed theology, Ursinius

Disciplines

Christian Denominations and Sects | Christianity | Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion

Comments

van Vliet compares the commentaries of Zacharias Ursinus and William Ames on the Heidelberg Catechism and shows that the latter misses elements of the inner coherence of this catechism with significance for the development of later Puritan thought.

Experiencing Our Only Comfort: A Post-Reformation Refocus in the Heidelberg Catechism¹

JAN VAN VLIET



Last year marked the 450th anniversary of the publication of the Heidelberg Catechism. In celebration of this momentous occasion and as a reminder of the contemporary applicability of this highly-regarded confessional document, this essay examines the earliest and most complete Puritan commentary extant: that of second-generation Puritan thinker William Ames (1576–1633), protégé of William Perkins (1558–1602), the “father” of the Puritan movement. We examine methodological considerations and two topical issues that arise when the venerated Catechism is placed in the hands of a practically oriented, post-Reformation divine for whom theology was none other than “living to God”: *Theologia est doctrina deo vivendi*.² It will become evident that this package of catechetical instruction carries as much—perhaps more—practical relevance today as when it was first authored four and a half centuries ago.

1. This essay is an edited and abbreviated version of chapter 7 in *The Rise of Reformed System: The Intellectual Heritage of William Ames*, Studies in Christian History and Thought (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2013), 129–61. Used with permission.

2. Guilielmus Amesius, *Medulla Theologiae, ex sacris literis, earumque interpretibus ex-tracta, & methodice disposita* (Amstelodami: Joannem Janssonium, 1623 (fragments), 1627), 1.1.1. The first English language version appeared as *The Marrow of Sacred Divinity, Drawne out of the holy Scriptures, and the Interpreters thereof, and brought into Method* (London: Edward Griffin for John Rothwell, 1642). A more readable version appeared in the second half of the twentieth century as *The Marrow of Theology*, translated from the 3rd Latin ed., 1629, edited and with an introduction by John D. Eusden (Boston-Philadelphia: Pilgrim, 1968; reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997). In this essay I cite the Eusden edition by book, chapter, and section.

William Ames's Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism: Methodological Considerations

In 1635, William Ames's catechetical teaching entitled *Christianæ Catecheseos Sciagraphia* came off the press. This posthumously published work was released in English in 1659 and entitled *The Substance of Christian Religion: Or, a plaine and easie Draught of the Christian Catechisme in LII Lectures, on Chosen Texts of Scripture, for each Lords-day of the Year, Learnedly and Perspicuously Illustrated with Doctrines, Reasons and Uses*.³ This lengthy title underscores both close similarities and differences in method, emphasis, and content with the model from Heidelberg upon which his exposition is based.

According to the author introducing the work, Ames "takes up an especially appropriate text from the word of God, breaks it apart and explains it succinctly, draws out lessons containing the catechetical doctrine, and finally applies them to their use."⁴ With Ursinus, Ames judged the teaching of the substance of Christianity to be presented most effectively in Sunday preaching over the course of the year. Ames's topical choice is also borrowed from his Reformed predecessors: there is one-to-one topical correspondence between each of Ames's fifty-two Lord's Days and those of the Heidelberg Catechism.

It is in the method that the differences are most notable. First is the absence of the unifying topical structure which gives the Heidelberg Catechism its characteristic designation as a manual of instruction for teaching the "three-fold" or "triple" knowledge. Ames certainly teaches of misery, deliverance, and thankfulness, but he ignores the way in which this thematic connection is brought forward in the

3. Guilielmus Amesius, *Christianæ Catecheseos Sciagraphia* (Franekeræ: Bernardum A. Berentsma, 1635). The 1635 posthumous publication was most likely the work of Hugh Peter, Ames's friend in Rotterdam. The first English language version came from London as *The Substance of Christian Religion: Or, a plaine and easie Draught of the Christian Catechisme, in LII Lectures, on Chosen Texts of Scripture, for each Lords-day of the Year, Learnedly and Perspicuously Illustrated with Doctrines, Reasons and Uses* (London: T. Mabb for Thomas Davies, 1659; Ann Arbor: University Microfilms); hereafter, *Catechisme* (Mabb ed.) A much more readable version is found in *A Sketch of the Christian's Catechism: William Ames (1576–1633)*, Todd M. Rester, trans., Joel R. Beeke, ed. (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2008). I am largely making use of this text; occasionally I cite the 1659 Mabb edition.

4. Ames, "To the kind and fair reader," *Catechisme*, 3; in citing this work, I use the designation *Catechisme* to eliminate confusion with the more conventional reference to the Heidelberg Catechism.

Heidelberg Catechism through its employment of the triple-headed motif. Second, the pedagogical sub-structure along which these two instruction manuals are organized can also be distinguished. Following true scholastic form, Ursinus's Heidelberg Catechism moves systematically forward in *quaestio* format.⁵ By contrast, Ames's *Catechisme* is in lecture form, "designed," after all, "for the use of his students...dictated...at their request."⁶ Ames self-consciously distances himself from the *quaestio* method employed in Ursinus's own commentary as well. This *Commentary* commences with the opening question and answer and provides very detailed expositions which occasionally lead to further questions of a polemical nature. Ursinus's entire work attests to his mastery of the Reformed doctrines of the day.

Ames is more exegetical in his approach, introducing with each Lord's Day topic a brief exposition of a leading scriptural passage taken from the Heidelberg Catechism's own proof-texting apparatus.⁷ This leads to a theological explanation in the form of "Doctrines" or "Lessons," each of which is applied very practically. These uses vary. They could be informational, instructional, or directional; some lend themselves more readily to the preacher for "exhortation," or even "admonition" and "reproof." Others invite polemic use to refute and thus reform the enemies of the orthodox Reformed faith, chiefly the "Arminians" and "Papists." Warnings of condemnation follow stern rebuke. While the biblical teaching can serve to the "humiliation" of believers and non-believers, the encouraging theme of comfort and consolation makes frequent appearances. The reader is reminded of the pastoral dimension of Ames, first introduced in his ethical teaching and most characteristic of the soul doctors who graced ecclesiastical life in the early modern Dutch Republic. Occasionally, and true to the emphasis of this work as a guide for ministers of the gospel,

5. From this point forward I refer to Ursinus rather than Ursinus and Olevianus because I will be referring to Ursinus's own commentary. I am using a number of versions for this comparison, but the chief one is *The Commentary of Dr. Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism*, G. W. Williard, trans. (Columbus: Scott and Bascom, 1852; reprint ed., Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1985); hereafter Ursinus, *Commentary*.

6. Ames, "To the kind and fair reader," *Catechisme*, 3.

7. Proof-texts were a later addition to the Heidelberg Catechism. W. Verboom notes that the first edition had marginally noted scripture chapters only. *De Theologie van de Heidelbergse Catechismus. Twaalf Themata: De Context en de Latere Uitwerking* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 1996), 17.

Ames provides “special admonition to ministers of the Word.” Randomly scattered throughout this prescribed format Ames raises sets of objections and questions on the more controversial topics such as the Reformed teaching of paedo-baptism (Lord’s Day 27) and the use of the Law (Lord’s Day 2). Finally, being more laconic than Ursinus (except when it came to his teaching on the Sabbath), Ames combines some Lord’s Days based on topical similarity.

Consider briefly his teaching on the topic of the Lord’s Supper. This article of faith was highly controversial in the theological and ecclesiological climate of the day and therefore presents itself as a good subject for examination of Reformed expositors. In the Heidelberg Catechism, this topic runs for three Lord’s Days (28–30) and eight questions and answers (75–82), comprising about ten per cent of Ursinus’s entire catechetical commentary as compared to less than five per cent of Ames’s *Catechisme*. Throughout Ursinus’s long description of the doctrine of communion, he addresses questions regarding this sacrament’s essence and design, its distinction from baptism, its verbatim meaning, its Roman Catholic counterpart, its lawful and unlawful use, its institution, and its recipients. The nature of the nine introductory questions gives him occasion to fully address the error of the celebration of the mass, of transubstantiation and of consubstantiation, as well as of the teaching of the Sacramentarians. He draws on arguments from the analogy of faith as expressed in Christ’s human nature, and parallel passages of Scripture and church tradition in order to advance the Reformed understanding of Jesus’ words as He instituted this sacrament. Ursinus brings in the Church Fathers, quoting from Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, Cyprian, Basil, Hilary, Gregory Nazianzus, Ambrose, Chrysostom, Theodoret and, most liberally, Augustine. Ursinus’s anti-papal corrective runs almost thirty pages, forty-five per cent of the total allotment for this particular topic covered in the three Lord’s Days mentioned above. As much of his exposition on the Lord’s Supper is devoted to refuting the errors of the papists as it is to positive instruction. In the last few pages, he demonstrates the supercessionist nature of the Lord’s Supper over the Jewish Passover.⁸

The penetrating and exhaustive nature of Ursinus’s commentary is in marked contrast to the more “prudent” method of William

8. Ursinus, *Commentary*, 377–440.

Ames, which is a more accessible teaching instrument for preachers asked to provide practical guidance. We see the classic Puritan homiletical method at work: text, doctrine, and use. Ames's *Catechisme* is one of the earliest teaching documents in which this "plain style" pattern is clearly employed and illustrated, a style introduced by William Perkins.⁹ The textual exposition often includes brief contextual highlights, the doctrinal lecture is expositional and apologetic in nature, and the applicatory emphasis is meant to ensure that preachers of God's Word exhort their congregations to be not only hearers but also doers. "The receiving of the word consists of two parts: attention of mind and intention of will."¹⁰ Under Ames's guiding hand, the Heidelberg Catechism is enlarged from being primarily an exhaustive manual of instruction in the Reformed faith to now serving as a manual for pulpit use. Preachers need to be concise and practical in their orientation, clearly enunciating the use to which each doctrine must be put.

9. For the earliest and best illustration of this "plain style" model, see William Perkins, *The Art of Prophesying with The Calling of the Ministry*, with a foreword by Sinclair B. Ferguson (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1996). This combines the following two volumes: *The Art of Prophesying* (first published as *Prophetica, sive de sacra et unica ratione concionandi* [Cambridge, 1592] and translated into English as *The Arte of Prophecyng, or, A Treatise concerning the sacred and onely true manner and methode of Preaching* [Cambridge, 1606]), and *The Calling of the Ministry*, 1605. Ferguson summarizes: "The form of the plain style was as follows: the preaching portion, be it text or passage, was explained in its context; the doctrine, or central teaching of the passage was expounded clearly and concisely; and then careful application to the hearers followed in further explanation of the 'uses'" (*The Art of Prophesying*, ix). In *The Art of Prophecyng*, Perkins adheres very closely to the Ramist method of exposition and logic. In the introduction to his translation and commentary on William Ames's philosophical work, Lee W. Gibbs notes that Perkins's "one fully Ramistic work" was written when Perkins was a fellow at Christ's College, Cambridge, a position he held for eleven years. Gibbs observes that Perkins "is probably the first Englishman to have written on preaching within the framework of Ramist philosophy" (William Ames, *Technometry*, Lee W. Gibbs, trans. and ed., Haney Foundation Series of the University of Pennsylvania, vol. 24 [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1979], 27; first published as *Technometria, Omnium & singularum Artium fines adaequatè circumscribens* [London: Milo Flesher, 1633] and itself part of a six-piece work published posthumously (1643) as one volume, [*Philosophemata*], *Technometry*, 27). See also Joseph A. Pipa, Jr., "William Perkins and the Development of Puritan Preaching," (Ph.D. diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 1985).

10. Ames, *Marrow*, 2.8.7. Lisa M. Gordis provides a highly readable and luminous study on the Puritan use of Scripture and style of preaching in *Opening Scripture: Bible Reading and Interpretive Authority in Puritan New England* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2003).

Topical Examination of the Heidelberg Catechism, Ursinus's *Commentary*, and Ames's *Catechisme*

On Comfort: Lord's Day 1

Ames's commentary on the opening theme of the Heidelberg Catechism is his longest chapter, comprising almost four per cent of his entire *Catechisme*, in contrast to the brevity of Ursinus who devotes less than one per cent of his *Commentary* to this topic. This fact alone invites close comparison.

By way of quick review, Q&A 1 teaches that one's only comfort in life and death resides in Christ and His redeeming, preserving grace. The answer is highly personal, warmly engaging the catechumens with the comfort found in the spiritual felicity granted by the Savior. Although the comfort in view is meant to refer to this-worldly concerns as well, the emphasis is clearly on spiritual deliverance and the assurance of future hope that being found in Jesus Christ yields.

Ursinus begins by noting that comfort "results from a certain process of reasoning, in which we oppose something good to something evil, that by a proper consideration of this good, we may mitigate our grief, and patiently endure the evil."¹¹ Only the "highest good" is sufficient to oppose the evil spoken of, the greatest of which is "sin and death." This highest good is represented by different entities in the variety of philosophical systems Ursinus enumerates as having currency during the sixteenth century. However, it is found in none of these systems. Rather, it is only in the "doctrine of the church" that such a good resides and "imparts a comfort that quiets and satisfies the conscience." Human misery and deliverance through Christ are found in the church's teaching.

This, therefore, is that christian comfort, spoken of in this question of the catechism, which is an only and solid comfort, both in life and death—a comfort consisting in the assurance of the free remission of sin, and of reconciliation with God, by and on account of Christ, and a certain expectation of eternal life, impressed upon the heart by the holy Spirit through the gospel, so that we have no doubt but that we are the property of Christ, and are beloved of God for his sake, and saved forever, according to the declaration of the Apostle Paul: "Who shall separate

11. Ursinus, *Commentary*, 17–18.

us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress,” &c.
(Rom. 8. 35.)¹²

The nature of this comfort is reconciliation with God through Christ’s blood. It brings deliverance from the miseries of sin and death, preservation of this reconciliation, and all other benefits Christ purchased for us to turn our evil into good and for “our full persuasion and assurance of all these great benefits, and of eternal life.” In fact, the only place where the comfort of which Ursinus speaks might be interpreted to apply directly to this present life is in his paragraph on the necessity of this comfort, which is twofold: “on account of our salvation” and “on account of praising and glorifying God.” For, after all, “the substance of our comfort, therefore, is briefly this:—That we are Christ’s, and through him reconciled to the Father, that we may be beloved of him and saved, the Holy Ghost and eternal life being given unto us.”¹³

This comfort is “solid” because it is unailing and unshaken. The Christian is empowered to withstand the various assaults of Satan by pointing to Christ’s satisfaction, reconciliation, redemption, preservation, perseverance on the “long and difficult” spiritual pilgrimage, and assurance of the Holy Spirit’s reassuring presence in times of doubting faith and weakness. He summarizes: “In this most severe and dangerous conflict, which all the children of God experience, christian consolation remains immoveable, and at length concludes: therefore Christ, with all his benefits, pertains even to me.”¹⁴

In answer to Q&A 2 (also Lord’s Day 1), Ursinus teaches that a knowledge of one’s misery is necessary to awaken a desire for deliverance (as sickness awakens a desire for medicine), to motivate to thankfulness, and to enable profitable hearing of the law and gospel. Knowledge of the deliverance through Jesus Christ saves from despair, awakens desire, provides comfort, prevents human substitutes in place of Christ’s redemption, enables faith (for “faith cannot be without knowledge”), and engenders gratitude.¹⁵

Finally, knowledge of gratitude is necessary to one’s comfort because, firstly, God will “grant deliverance only to the thankful.”

12. Ursinus, *Commentary*, 18.

13. Ursinus, *Commentary*, 19–20.

14. Ursinus, *Commentary*, 20.

15. Ursinus, *Commentary*, 21–22.

Secondly, gratitude acceptable to God must be properly exercised according to the rule of His Word. Thirdly, in gratitude we acknowledge the non-meritorious nature of our service to God and neighbor, while, finally, expressions of gratitude work to increase our faith and comfort.¹⁶

A study of the remainder of the Catechism will unfold this almost exclusively soteriological dimension. The spiritual overtones of the primary theme upon which the entire Catechism is constructed call to mind W. Verboom's judgment that the Heidelberg Catechism is soteriological, theological, and experiential, and that, as demonstrated in the pervasive theme of the appropriation of knowledge that yields comfort, it is a document that challenges both the head and the heart.¹⁷

Practical theologian William Ames commences with Psalm 4 as opening text: "The aim of this Psalm is to teach us, by the example of David, how we ought to conduct ourselves when we are whirled into great dangers." Theology is the teaching of living to God. Ames, the logician, is quick to employ Peter Ramus's system. Through a system of dichotomies, Ames asserts that, in this psalm, David accomplishes two things: he prays for deliverance from imminent danger and he shows the encouragement offered his soul through this prayer. David demonstrates that his highest good (*summum bonum*, nomenclature also used by Ursinus) is found in divine favor. This felicity brings a joy far surpassing that of any earthly goods as recipients of such favor are delivered from fear and given to bask in security and safety. And "good" is understood as all that appears delightful, useful, pleasing, or any other thing that seems desirable." Because David's consolation in affliction and life was this *summum bonum*, so must it be for us.¹⁸ Ames continues:

Moreover, "highest good" is specifically understood as that in which our blessedness consists. In this blessedness is contained the confluence of all desirable goods. Moreover, the highest good is called a "consolation," just as it is in the Catechism, since it is like a uniting (consolidation) of the soul and a confirmation

16. Ursinus, *Commentary*, 22.

17. Verboom, *Heidelbergse Catechismus*, 19–24.

18. Ames, *Catechisme*, 5–6.

against griefs, sorrows, or opposing terrors. A proper consolation is a mitigation of griefs, sorrows, and fears.¹⁹

Ames methodically elaborates on this chief good. He explains its teleological nature, the careless risk and cost of ignoring it in favor of this life's "trifles," its governance over and proper grounding of all our actions, and its inherent dignity and excellence. Finally, this doctrine should reprove and refute the irrational and unchristian disregard of those who ignore such chief good since they do so at their own peril.²⁰

From verse 6 of the psalm Ames draws his second doctrinal lesson: that man's felicity is not found in the here and now in material wealth, sensual delight, or reputation. Since such worldly goods are fleeting, often bringing sin and misery with them, and are held in common with the beasts which are incapable of the "capacity for blessedness," the soul and spirit are not perfected by this type of good. In fact, disregard for such worldly wealth is a virtue, a mark of spiritual maturity. This teaching is to be used for reproof towards those in pursuit of blessedness through such external possessions.²¹

Ames finally comes to the heart of the psalm's teaching: it is covenantal. "Our true and highest good consists in the union and communion we have with God." This is "deduced" from verse 6b: "LORD, lift thou up the light of thy countenance upon us." "God Himself," asserts Ames, "is the true and highest good," both practically and objectively because God is the instrument of that blessing, both in its communication and as its appropriation. In this Scripture, God identifies Himself as the God of the covenant (Yahweh); thus, this communion is true to the covenant axiom: "I will be your God; I will be your ample reward."²² He explains:

[O]ur communion with God is our formal blessedness and is commonly called the *vision of God* and the *beatific vision*. Now to "see God," in the phrasing of Scripture, does not signify either the sight of the eyes or the mere speculation of the intellect, but every sort of enjoyment of God, inasmuch as it causes our blessedness. Moreover, we arrive at this enjoyment or communion

19. Ames, *Catechisme*, 6. Again, notice the remarkable similarity in language between Ames and Ursinus at this point; cf. Ursinus, *Commentary*, 17–18.

20. Ames, *Catechisme*, 6–7.

21. Ames, *Catechisme*, 7.

22. Ames, *Catechisme*, 8.

through Jesus Christ our Lord, and it is precisely this consolation that the Catechism appropriately says is caused by Christ. Everything we receive that pertains to our blessedness refers back to Christ.²³

Fully halfway through this, his longest Lord's Day, Ames finally explains (if ever so briefly) that this chief good and consolation is attained through Jesus Christ. But then, Ames the philosopher is again quick to leave Christ and move directly to the reasons for having God as chief good, supplemented by texts from the Old Testament (Psalms and Isaiah). These reasons focus on the peace that communion with God yields; that God is the first and efficient cause of all things, as well as the end, and therefore in Him alone can be found the goal and perfection of life; that God alone is independent and therefore trust in Him is certain; that He represents the only infinite good since only He can be imparted to all; and that only God is free of any hint of imperfection. There is no further elaboration on Jesus Christ as chief good. The value of this teaching lies in its motivating power to seek God as chief good, and its encouraging tone in reinforcing the blessedness of those in Christ despite life's setbacks.²⁴

The doctrinal teaching of Lesson 4 expands on the all-surpassing "sweetness" of communion with God, the highest good, contrasting it with the fleeting, false, and counterfeit joys of the world that are often overcome by affliction and "suffocating vexations of conscience." True spiritual joy and its consoling power overcome the whole person—body, soul, and spirit—and is eternal. Armed with Acts 5:41 and James 1:2, Ames asserts that, as counter-intuitive as it may seem, worldly affliction often gives cause for rejoicing. The reader is thus warned against the deceptive power of material delights and the duplicity of the ungodly who promote such delight in opposition to piety. The faithful are encouraged to "eagerly contend" for this joy, overcoming impediments through ongoing repentance and amendment of life. The spiritual discipline of uninterrupted fellowship with God is strongly encouraged as the thankful believer meditates on the gift of God's promises and blessings given in Christ Jesus.²⁵

23. Ames, *Catechisme*, 8.

24. Ames, *Catechisme*, 8–9.

25. Ames, *Catechisme*, 9–11.

Ames's commentary on this Lord's Day closes on the strong note of assurance found in the final passage of the psalm: "This joy and holy consolation convey a certain security to the consciences of the faithful." This assurance contrasts with worldly security because it is grounded in God's protecting presence and immutability, features obtained through the means of grace including God's Word—both read and preached—and prayer. Again, in contradistinction from the security of the world based on "vain imagination" and human traditions, only this authentic assurance will deliver from all anxieties and discouragement.²⁶

The key similarities and differences between Ursinus and Ames on the Heidelberg Catechism's introductory chapter can be summarized as follows:

- 1) Both emphasize intellectual apprehension of the Christian faith in attaining comfort. The experiential dimension is somewhat attenuated.
- 2) In this rational process, the philosophical concept of *summum bonum*—the "chief good" or "highest good"—is introduced by Ursinus to demonstrate the remedy for sin and to explain the failure of all competing philosophies as solutions, including the doctrine of the Church of Rome. Sin is overcome only through the *summum bonum*—reconciliation with God through Christ. William Ames more loosely follows Ursinus's reasoning at this point. He is certainly more loathe to let go of the designation "chief good" and his focus is primarily philosophical and practical. The concept regularly reappears throughout his *Catechisme*. Fully halfway through his exposition of Psalm 4 Ames underscores the consoling function of Jesus Christ as the means to that chief good. Although no full scale Christology and soteriology is expected, Ames's teaching on Christ seems rather abbreviated. In fact, while Ursinus points directly to the saviorhood of Jesus, nowhere in Lord's Day 1 does Ames mention the saving, reconciling work of Jesus Christ. This has to wait until much later in Lord's Day 11.

26. Ames, *Catechisme*, 11.

- 3) Permeating Ames's doctrinal exposition is the surpassing nature of that "joy" and "happiness" located in the *summum bonum*." There is an obvious shift from an emphasis on comfort and consolation to one of joy and happiness obtained through Jesus Christ our Lord. While certainly having reference to spiritual issues, this-worldly concerns are predominant if only to warn of their imperfect and sinful nature. Ursinus, on the other hand, never uses the words "happy" or "joy"; "comfort" is everywhere synonymous with "spiritual comfort" and is always to be taken soteriologically.²⁷ The soteriological and eschatological character of the Heidelberg Catechism receives less emphasis from Ames right from the opening theme.
- 4) Ames provides an argument from covenant very early in his work. Although only briefly and in passing, he teaches that it is by the formula of the covenant that Yahweh asserts Himself as both the efficient cause and objective reality of one's happiness. The covenant is the vehicle whereby God communicates Himself to humanity. Indeed, the name "Jehovah" underscores this relational, covenantal character of God. Blessedness and comfort derive from the *hesed* with which Yahweh engages His chosen family. This is in sharp contrast to early covenant theologian Ursinus, who waits until his teaching on Christ as mediator (Lord's Day 6) to introduce his covenant teaching.²⁸ Psalm 4 serves as Ames's scriptural foundation for grounding comfort and consolation in covenant theology from the very outset.
- 5) Yet Psalm 4 warrants further mention. Although everything that Ames says could legitimately be drawn from this passage, it is curious that not one of the many New Testament texts on the comfort of Christ is employed. The Heidelberg

27. Ursinus, *Commentary*, 18.

28. Ursinus, *Commentary*, 96; Christ is the mediator who reconciles opposing parties, says Ursinus; this is the task of mediators and in their work, they bring reconciliation. So it is with Christ: "This reconciliation is called in the Scriptures a Covenant, which has particular reference to the Mediator.... Hence the doctrine of the Covenant which God made with man, is closely connected with the doctrine of the Mediator" (*Commentary*, 96).

Catechism illustrates a few of these as prooftexts which clearly point to the overwhelming soteriological comfort of the gospel. But, the question of the Holy Spirit does not even come up. This work of comfort, argues Ursinus, is a trinitarian task from the start. Perhaps this usage of Old Testament Scripture as his point of departure has obligated Ames's exposition in a direction of muted Christology. This is a marked difference from the biblically, more holistic sweep of the Heidelberg Catechism. Ames exhibited the typical Puritan adherence to the Old Testament, sometimes at the expense of the more illuminated teaching of the New Testament. This would explain teaching on many themes but, chiefly, on the fulfillment of the gospel promises in Jesus Christ. Comfort involves the entire Godhead, as Ursinus emphasized (Q&A 1).²⁹

These differences in emphases between the Heidelberg Catechism and Ursinus's commentary and that of William Ames are not without consequence for the remainder of these respective teaching documents. The expositions of the Heidelberg Catechism and Ursinus have an unmistakable inner coherence, a three-dimensional structure through which the opening theme carries forward almost seamlessly as it weaves its way through the remaining fifty-one Lord's Days. Each of the 128 questions enlarges upon the first. Each points back to this "comfort," understood primarily soteriologically. Although William Ames has borrowed each of his fifty-two "lecture" topics from the Heidelberg Catechism, and even though much of his exposition borrows from Ursinus, the comfort of which Ames's *Catechisme* speaks does not carry the inner coherence of the Heidelberg Catechism, and its elucidation of the notion of "comfort" from a more concrete, this-worldly perspective sets the stage for a more practical approach to the subsequent exposition. At this point, one might also pause to consider whether Ames's more didactic and practical transformation of the Heidelberg Catechism may have been carried forward into the Westminster Standards, notably the Larger and Shorter Catechism.

29. Ursinus, *Commentary*, 18-22.

On the Holy Spirit: Lord's Day 20

Continuing his exposition of the Apostles' Creed, Ursinus now addresses the Holy Spirit. He expands on the singularly soteriological and trinitarian aspect given briefly in the Heidelberg Catechism to explain, in considerably more detail, the Spirit's Person, office, and gifts.

The Spirit is consubstantial with the Father and Son, yet both distinct and equal. He enlightens, regenerates, unites in Christ, and rules His children by directing their actions to the service of God and neighbor as articulated in the Decalogue. The Spirit has a comforting and strengthening presence for the endangered and the weak in faith. He provides gifts at His discretion, both common (to all people) and charismatic (to the early church only). The Spirit is received by faith, and, although He is given invisibly to the church through Word and sacrament, He has been known to have been given visibly (e.g., at Jesus' baptism), "at particular times, and for certain causes." The presence of the Holy Spirit is secured through diligent religious exercises (preaching, sacraments, gospel meditation, prayer, faithful exercise of gifts, penitence, and avoidance of sins that "offend" the conscience). While the truly regenerate never lose the Spirit's gifts, "hypocrites and reprobate sinners" do since they were never truly numbered with the elect. The Holy Spirit is necessary for our salvation, understood broadly to include regeneration, thinking and doing good, knowing and obeying God, and inheriting the kingdom of heaven. Finally, one may authentically know of the Holy Spirit's indwelling through faith and repentance.³⁰ The exposition of Ursinus is permeated with biblical texts attesting to the doctrinal points he makes.

The much briefer exposition of William Ames covers much the same territory and borrows heavily from the Heidelberg Catechism and from Ursinus's *Commentary*. The nature and being of the Holy Spirit within the Trinity is explored as freely given to the faithful. But Ames's deliberately more practical angle is demonstrated by the scriptural text he employs. Ames's emphasis is purity of body. In 1 Corinthians 6:19, Paul asks: "What? know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own?" Although this text appears in the Heidelberg Catechism and in Ursinus's explanation as well, it is only one among many texts brought to bear from both testaments, and is a

30. Ursinus, *Commentary*, 270–85.

minor force in the highly soteriological context in which this teaching of the Holy Spirit is cast. By contrast, emphasizing purity of the body constitutes the focus of Ames's pneumatology:

These words contain the most efficacious argument against whoring and similar sins. It is sought from the opposite end, because, of course, the purpose of Christian bodies is plainly opposed to this sin. This purpose is declared by the possessor and inhabiter of the subject: the Holy Spirit. The subject is explained through the metaphor of a temple, because certainly our bodies are like houses consecrated for Him. Indeed, in order to render this argument more evident and effective, the apostle adds: The Holy Spirit is the one who has made it subject, as it is also adjoined that He possesses our bodies so that He may have them for his own dwelling place. Further on he illustrates in both respects the relation we have to the Holy Spirit: by His efficient cause, because we have Him from God, and from the consequent effect and its adjunct—that is, by faith and by certain knowledge of the relation that exists between the Holy Spirit and our bodies, which is illustrated by the words “Are you ignorant, brethren...?”³¹

Key to Ames's conception of purity of life is the physical body as both the possession and habitation of the Holy Spirit. Ames's pneumatology is essentially cast in terms of moral theology. Yet the theological lessons Ames draws from this text—certainly the first two—bear an uncanny resemblance to Ursinus's exposition, one grounded in more traditional and directly soteriological biblical teaching on the Holy Spirit.³² Ames anchors both these lessons in the doctrine that one's body, in its capacity as the Spirit's temple, is consecrated to God and thus sacred. The application of this text is to give proper Trinitarian direction to faith and to refrain from grieving or quenching the Holy Spirit.³³ That Ames derives these doctrines from his opening text is rather surprising; he clearly prefers Ursinus's commentary with its theological emphasis based on scriptures with explicit soteriological overtones.

31. Ames, *Catechisme*, 103.

32. Ursinus, *Commentary*, 271; Ames, *Catechisme*, 103–4.

33. Ames, *Catechisme*, 104–5.

It is with Ames's third doctrinal lesson that the reason for his scriptural choice becomes more obvious—again, of course, the importance of maintaining purity of body since the Holy Spirit resides in the complete person—soul and body. Ames is now ready to address the overwhelmingly practical, this-worldly dimension of Paul's teaching anchored firmly in the opening biblical text from 1 Corinthians 6. Believers must purge sin from their bodies, which must be employed to God's glory. Ames explains the contradictory nature of having both sin and the Holy Spirit reside in the temple of God. Application of this teaching is, as expected, overwhelmingly adjuring: the believer is pointed specifically to Christ's behavior at the commerce enthusiastically transpiring in the temple. The implication is clear: cast your demons—lust, carnality, etc.—out of your body, the Holy Spirit's temple.³⁴ Recall Ursinus's comment that one of the Holy Spirit's offices was to rule the actions of men and women to ensure conformity to both tables of the Decalogue.³⁵ Of the sixteen pages Ursinus devotes to explicating the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, this one line will have to suffice as to the practical, immediate use of this doctrine for the believer.

Note that Ursinus's brevity is at the same time much more comprehensive than Ames. Ursinus points to the whole law; Ames only mentions fornication and physical impurity. This particular Pauline statement is obviously all about physical impurity and this clearly explains Ames's focus, but he is not at all prepared to leave the practical implications of pneumatology quite so skimpy with respect to proper care of the physical body, the Holy Spirit's temple. For Ames, the idea of the Holy Spirit's ownership over and residency within the physical body lies at the core of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit as he teaches it in *Catechisme*. The point is brought home in the fifth and last lesson on this Lord's Day, a final warning to self-examination, and further encouragement to experiential knowledge of the Holy Spirit's indwelling and purity of life.³⁶

Thus ends the pneumatological teaching of Ames's *Catechisme*. Using a curious Scripture, the whole meaning of which conjures up the idea of moral behavior, and liberally borrowing soteriological

34. Ames, *Catechisme*, 105–6.

35. Ursinus, *Commentary*, 278.

36. Ames, *Catechisme*, 106.

emphasis from Ursinus's teaching, Ames again manages, even in his doctrine of the Holy Spirit, to "direct" and "instruct" preachers-in-training to focus the attention of their listeners upon moral purity of life. The pneumatology of Ames, as it appears here in his *Catechisme*, is a quintessential example of putting a Scripture with an overriding practical emphasis to theological, soteriological use. Whereas most theologians would generally have taken a theological teaching and pointed to its practical implications (as Ursinus does, for example), Ames reverses the order and converts a primarily theological teaching to an exhortation in practical divinity. While not neglecting the soteriological dimension, the Amesian emphasis in pneumatology is the overcoming of sin's reign in the body, the Holy Spirit's temple.

Miscellaneous Emphases

It is worthwhile to briefly underscore some uniquely Amesian emphases. While some of these simply represent Ames's view of what was important in the practice of theology, other emphases, although now part of standard Reformed theological thinking, were only just beginning to develop at this time and should be understood as newly emerging components of Reformed theology. In the category of the former, we can mention his curious departure from the more precise and systematic model of the Heidelberg Catechism. Thus, for example, Ames discusses only the article in the Apostles' Creed on Christ's death, neglecting to examine the topic of His burial and descent into hell (Lord's Day 16).³⁷ In Lord's Day 31, where the Heidelberg Catechism discusses the keys of the kingdom, Ames chooses to address the topic by introducing God as a God of order who has appointed ministers to oversee the church through ministerial powers. The means used for the exercise of this power are identified only briefly at the very end of the exposition of the Lord's Day; discipline is barely mentioned and left entirely unexplained.³⁸ Not surprisingly, the doctrine of the Sabbath is expounded at great length and grounded, as with Ursinus, in the example set by God at creation.³⁹

Our comparison of Ames's and Ursinus's respective expositions of the Ten Commandments introduces Ursinus as an early practitioner

37. Ames, *Catechisme*, 83–87.

38. Ames, *Catechisme*, 144–46.

39. Ames, *Catechisme*, 169–75; cf. Ursinus, *Commentary*, 557–74.

of casuistry. Extended development of the teaching of the Commandments, while in some cases only hinted at in the Heidelberg Catechism, receive full coverage in his *Commentary*. So, for example, the fifth commandment—to honor one’s father and mother—can be extended to cover all relationships between superiors and inferiors. Ames does this as well. And both commentators make frequent use of the term and the concept of synecdoche, explaining it frequently to ensure the reader knows the means whereby generalizations are made from specifics.⁴⁰

Finally, Ames’s doctrine of the church is introduced with the Pauline teaching on the relationship between husbands and wives (Eph. 5:25–27). Paul exhorts husbands to love their wives even as Christ loved the church and gave Himself for it.⁴¹ What is at first glance a very practical, unsoteriological passage is used by Ames to introduce a rather experiential theme—the doctrine of the church. Although the coverage is much briefer than that of Ursinus, many of the same elements regarding the church’s essence and character are covered.⁴² And “because the Common Place of the eternal predestination of God, or of election and reprobation naturally grows out of the doctrine of the church: and is for this reason correctly connected with it,”⁴³ Ursinus chooses to handle that central doctrine at this point in his *Commentary*. His exposition on the doctrine of predestination is half again as long as his teaching on the doctrine of the church.⁴⁴ In the *Catechisme* of Ames, on the other hand, one looks in vain for formal and prolonged teaching on the doctrine of predestination.

One area where Ames showed himself to be at the forefront of the development of theological thought occurs in Lord’s Day 15. The issue here has to do with the suffering of Christ. Here Ames brings in the idea of the pre-temporal covenant between God the Father and God the Son. Christ’s expiation, Ames explains, “was the covenant initiated (*pactum initum*) between the Father and Christ: if he should offer this obedience for us, then, since we have been liberated from disobedience and death, we should live in Him (Isa. 53:10). This

40. Ursinus, *Commentary*, 577–83; Ames, *Catechisme*, 176–79; cf. idem, *Conscience*, 5.19–5.20, 5.23; cf. idem, *Marrow*, 2.17.66.

41. Ames, *Catechisme*, 107–10.

42. Ursinus, *Commentary*, 285–93.

43. Ursinus, *Commentary*, 293.

44. Ursinus, *Commentary*, 293–305.

suffering was the consummation of every obedience.”⁴⁵ The concept of a pre-temporal agreement within the Godhead was not yet part and parcel of received covenant theology, and its appearance here is somewhat surprising. Ursinus, one of the earliest covenant theologians, certainly makes no mention of such a covenant when he asks, “What was the Impelling Cause of the Passion of Christ?” He answers: God’s love for the human race, His compassion for those “fallen in sin and death,” and His desire and purpose to avenge Satan who spoiled God’s image in humanity.⁴⁶ This pre-fall covenantal agreement between the Father and the Son, asserts Ames, is of comfort to the faithful because it represents the remedy for sin while admonishing us to abhor sin.⁴⁷

Final Observations

It should be observed that the “ecclesiastical tone” mentioned by Verboom as characteristic of earlier catechisms, if absent from the Heidelberg Catechism proper, is quite prominent in Ursinus’s *Commentary*. The prolegomena of Ursinus is dominated by his “Doctrine of the Church.”⁴⁸ He begins: “These Prolegomena are partly general, such as treat of the entire doctrine of the Church: and partly special, such as have respect merely to the Catechism.” The doctrine of the church “reveals the only way of escape through Christ.”⁴⁹ In the midst of his ecclesiology, he introduces and expands on decretal theology, a central and growing locus in the theological development during this period of early orthodoxy. Moreover, while the pathos and the personal nature of the Heidelberg Catechism certainly are its domineering spirit, Ursinus’s *Commentary* shows that he can engage in polemics with detractors of the Reformed faith when the need arises.

Ames’s method, like that of Ursinus, is replete with Ramism and, to a lesser extent, syllogistic reasoning. It does not carry the soteriological focus of Ursinus even if the overall theme of *Catechisme* is in agreement with Ursinus. Although it is obvious that Ames is prone to wander from this theme, the areas he borrows from Ursinus for his own exposition are clear and unmistakable. Furthermore, as in all his work, Ames ably demonstrates that no theological truth, be it ever so

45. Ames, *Catechisme*, 82.

46. Ursinus, *Commentary*, 216.

47. Ames, *Catechisme*, 82.

48. Ursinus, *Commentary*, 1.

49. Ursinus, *Commentary*, 18.

theoretical or existential, can be without some exhortation to *eupraxia*. This is not conducted in a vacuum, but rather proceeds according to scriptural rules set out in God's revelation. The Heidelberg Catechism is pithy, personal, and pastoral. While Ursinus's *Commentary* is more expository, it also communicates a warm and pastoral sentiment to the heart of the reader. Although there are instances where William Ames does touch the heart in a pastoral way, such pathos does not flow from his mind and pen in a consistent way in his commentary. His concern here is simply for greater immediate application to one's present life. This accounts also for the exhortative tendencies found in his commentary. The preacher seeking to direct the faithful in their soul struggle could not aspire to be the kind of physician of souls bred by the Heidelberg Catechism on the strength of his *Catechisme* alone. For this they would have to go to his *Conscience*.

The Heidelberg Catechism has often been charged with inserting a strong anthropocentric flavor into the teaching of the church. This point is frequently made in the context of comparisons with the Westminster Standards, the catechisms of which, it is argued, are more theocentric from the very outset where the theme is established in Q&A 1 in both the Larger and Shorter Catechism. To enter into this debate, at this point, will take us too far afield, but our study of William Ames has demonstrated that one can move in both directions on this score.

For example, on the one hand, the possibilities for putting an anthropocentric gloss on the Heidelberg Catechism are very real. The "Amesian gloss," as he has given it to us in his *Catechisme*, emphasizes practical divinity. On the other hand, this same document clearly shows instances where it is highly theocentric as well. Ames's long and exhaustive discussion on "God himself" as the "true chief good, as well effectively as objectively" underscores the God-centeredness of this work in the context of the source of comfort for the believer. Perhaps we should remember that, prior to all theologies, Calvin's *Institutes* set the standard by underscoring the need for an understanding of both the Creator and the creature, and the chasm between the two. In the Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 1 teaches that the creature's only comfort is in the re-creative work of the Creator. In both the Larger and Shorter catechisms of the Westminster Standards, Q&A 1 teaches that while the Creator is to be glorified, the creature is to do the enjoying of Him forever.

For Ames, it is essential that the Heidelberg Catechism be adapted to pulpit use—to plain-style preaching form. For when it comes to priorities in preaching a sermon, “which part is most to be insisted on, the explication of the Text, the handling of the Doctrines, or the Use and Explication of them?” While “some speciall occasion may make the large explication of the text, or handling of the Doctrine to be necessary, . . . regularly, and ordinarily the principall worke of the Sermon, if it be not Catechetically, is in the use and application.”⁵⁰ Ames’s commentary has modified the *Catechisme* to perfectly fit his recipe for effective preaching.

At this point, it might also be instructive to recall that the Westminster Larger and Shorter catechisms closely duplicate this Amesian method of exposition and instruction. In the Larger Catechism, Q&A 1–90 teach of God; Q&A 91–196 teach that “Having seen what the scriptures principally teach us to believe concerning God, it follows to consider what they require as the duty of man.” The Shorter Catechism is so organized as well: Q&A 1–38 teach doctrine; the second half begins with the question posed in Q 39: “What is the duty which God requires of man?” The remainder of the Shorter Catechism, through the final question and answer (107), enlarges on this.⁵¹

It is interesting to note that in the opening question of the Westminster Larger and Shorter catechisms, the divines have skipped back over the Heidelberg Catechism to revert back to the first question in Calvin’s catechism which seeks to establish the chief end of man being to know God. But it is not enough to know God. That the divines appropriated William Ames’s emphasis is clear here in their amended (from Calvin’s) declaration of humanity’s goal or chief end. It was not enough to “know” God, however experientially this might be interpreted. Men and women, throughout their daily existence, must work to actively glorify God in thought, word, and deed. Yes, through faith by grace alone was salvation secured. And only through divinely empowered covenantal obedience would the child of God enter into the felicity reserved for the saints and begin, even in this life, to fully enjoy Him forever. It has been demonstrated that William Ames did all he could to ensure that this living and very practical faith

50. Ames, *Conscience*, 4.26.Q11–4.26.Q12.

51. *The Confession of Faith (1647), The Larger Catechism (1648), The Shorter Catechism (1648), The Directory of Public Worship* (Toronto: Presbyterian Publications, n.d.).

was not lost on the continental catechumen nurtured on the Heidelberg Catechism. Ames deliberately revised this popular teaching document to ensure that this emphasis would be impressed upon the student in faith, from both pulpit and podium, through his very practical overlay of the already warm, personal, and experiential Heidelberg Catechism.

In his brief but useful introductory section on some of the historical issues surrounding the origins and development of the Heidelberg Catechism, Verboom mentions approvingly the four-fold purpose that Karl Barth understood that doctrinal standard to serve:

1. The Heidelberg Catechism is a textbook for instruction in the faith for church, home, and school.
2. The Heidelberg Catechism is a guide and rule for preachers, students, and others.
3. The Heidelberg Catechism has a liturgical aspect. According to the Church Order of 1563, each Sunday [Lord's Day] ensures that a portion of it is read during the church service.
4. The Heidelberg Catechism is a guiding principle for the catechism sermon that is held in the Sunday afternoon lesson.⁵²

To these, William Ames would indubitably add purpose number 5: The Heidelberg Catechism is a guidebook for living to godliness.

52. Karl Barth, *Einführung in dem Heidelberger Katechismus* (Zurich, 1960), cited in Verboom, *Heidelbergse Catechismus*, 18–19.