TRUTH AT ALL COSTS: HEIDELBERG CATECHISM

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Luke 22:14-20

It seems as if all of the TV shows and movies which come out these days revolve around superheroes. These are people who can fly, who can run really fast, who can climb buildings, or simply jump over them, they are super strong, they can turn invisible, they can do amazing things that the rest of us cannot. They can wear white shoes after Labor Day. The job of these superheroes is to stop the bad guys or the aliens from destroying the earth and/or the galaxy. These superheroes are really good at fighting. The high point of every movie is the cataclysmic battle between good and evil that destroys New York City. And that is how the movie should be. It is far more exciting that way. I am not going to pay money to watch a movie called The Incredible Hulk in which the Hulk sits down with his adversary and they both talk about their feelings and then settle their conflict in a non-confrontational manner. I want to see Hulk smash things.

These superheroes with their amazing powers are <u>not</u> real. They are just the products of fertile imaginations. Real heroes, however, do exist. Real heroes are those women and men who inspire us with their words and actions, who call us to be better people, who reveal to us, as Abraham Lincoln phrased it, "the better angels of our nature."[1]

My sermon today is the second of a five-part series on the creeds and confessions of the Presbyterian Church. The occasion for this series is the 500th anniversary—on October 31—of Martin Luther posting his 95 Theses in Wittenberg, Germany—an event which lit a fire under the Protestant Reformation. Last week, we looked at the Scots Confession—a document penned by the Scottish priest John Knox to be used to bring political and ecclesiastical unity to Scotland.

The document we are going to look at today is the Heidelberg Catechism which comes out of Germany. A catechism is primarily a teaching tool. The word catechism is from the Greek and means "to teach orally." Catechisms consist of questions and answers—a format that is useful for teaching children. It is also effective for teaching adults who are illiterate. The Heidelberg Catechism contains 129 questions and answers.

The first question of this catechism is probably its most well-known. The catechism begins, "What is your only comfort, in life and in death?" The answer is this: "That I belong—body and soul, in life and in death—not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ, who at the cost of his own blood has fully paid for all

[11] https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/31631-we-are-not-enemies-but-friends-we-must-not-be

my sins and has completely freed me from the dominion of the devil; that he protects me so well that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, that everything must fit his purpose for my salvation. Therefore, by his Holy Spirit, he also assures me of eternal life, and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him."

This first question establishes the framework for the rest of the catechism. It is, above all else, about Jesus Christ. The catechism can be divided into three sections. The first deals with sin and guilt; the second section describes the way in which God, through Christ, frees us; and the third explains how we may express our gratitude to God for God's forgiveness and salvation. In other words: 1) we are sinners, 2) we are forgiven, and 3) we should express our thanks to God.

This catechism was written in Germany in 1563 in the midst of the Protestant Reformation. The church—the Roman church, the only church in Europe—was by this time fifteen centuries old. Many were arguing that the church had lost its way, that the leadership was corrupt and had become more concerned with power than with Christ, that loving one's neighbor had been supplanted a drive for the accumulation of wealth.

This period in the church's history that we call the Protestant Reformation is remarkable for the number of people that I would label as heroes—women and men who put their lives on the line because of their deeply-held love of Christ and their desire to do what they believed to be right. One of these heroes is Frederick III of Simmern of the House of Wittelsbach. He is known as Frederick the Elector. Frederick was born in 1515 and raised a Catholic. However, upon his marriage to princess Maria of Brandenburg, who was a devout Lutheran, he made a public profession of faith and became a Protestant. At his wife's insistence, he read the bible every day.

In the year 1559, when Frederick was 44 years old, Frederick's uncle, Otto-Henry (Ottheinrich), died. Otto-Henry had no children so his title as Elector of the Palatinate passed to Frederick. The Palatinate is a region in central Germany. An Elector is an especially powerful prince. Electors (there were just seven of them) had the responsibility of electing the emperor. When Frederick became an Elector he moved to Heidelberg and took up residence at Heidelberg Castle.

In 1517, just two years after Frederick was born, Martin Luther had initiated the Protestant Reformation in Wittenberg, Germany, just 300 miles north of Heidelberg. His ideas for reforming the church spread to through Europe to Heidelberg, to Zurich, to Paris, and beyond. However, there were divisions among these Protestants. They were not uniform in their beliefs. This becomes evident in the Palatinate where Frederick ruled. The issue here was the Lord's Supper. Because of its location and the tolerance of his uncle, the Palatinate had become a theological crossroads of Lutheranism, Zwingli-ism and Calvinism. The dispute

around the Lord's Supper focused specifically on what happens to the bread and the wine during the sacrament. According to the scripture, as I read earlier, at the Passover meal, Jesus held the bread and said, *This is my body*.

The Roman church had long held a view known as *transubstantiation.* This asserts that, "The signs of bread and wine become, in a way surpassing understanding, the Body and Blood of Christ." The bread is the flesh of Christ. Exactly how this happens is designated a "mystery."

Protestants deviated from this theology but in different directions. The Lutheran's adopted a view known as *consubstantiation*. Luther interpreted the scripture literally. Jesus said, *This is my body*, and that was good enough for Luther. He contended that since God was omnipotent that Christ's physical body could be present everywhere at once, that it is present alongside the bread and wine.

A second view came from Ulrich Zwingli who was a reformer from Switzerland. (We will talk more about him next week.) Zwingli argued that if Jesus was holding the bread at the Passover then it could not logically also be his body. So therefore the bread only symbolized Jesus' body. This was the view adopted by the Anabaptists of the Reformation and by the Baptists today—that communion is a symbolic act, the bread only symbolizes Jesus' body which is in heaven. The purpose of communion is to <u>remember</u> Jesus as he had asked his disciples to do.

The third view came from the Calvinists. They tooke a middle position between the Lutherans and the Zwinglians arguing that Christ is really present in the bread and wine but that presence is spiritual, not physical.

You may think that all of this theological debate over what happens in the Lord's Supper was merely academic. It wasn't. Feelings ran deep. For example, the debate played out one Sunday morning in a physical altercation in church. It was the Holy Spirit Church in Heidelberg—Frederick's Church. The assistant pastor and the senior pastor were standing before the congregation at the table celebrating the Lord's Supper. The assistant pastor (a Zwinglian) lifted the cup when the senior pastor (a Lutheran) attempted to take it away from him. There is a complicated back-story to this event, but none-the-less, the two ministers tussled over the cup in front of the entire church. Frederick was so disgusted by this that he fired them both. This event brought the urgency of the Protestants' division even closer. Frederick determined to resolve the situation. He closed himself in his rooms to study the Bible looking for the answers to the questions that were tearing his land apart.

Frederick wrote a letter to Philip Melanchthon, who was the successor to Martin Luther. Melanchthon's response was this, "In all things seek peace and moderation. This is done best", he wrote, "by holding carefully to a fixed doctrinal

position as regards the Lord's Supper and all other matters of faith." By this time, as a result of his intense study of scripture, Frederick was leaning toward the Calvinists' view.

Frederick commissioned the new pastor of the church along with the head of the theological academy the task of developing a definitive statement of faith for the people of the Palatinate. He was looking for, as Melanchthon recommended, "a fixed doctrinal position." He knew that a document was needed—a catechism to instruct young Protestants and to unify the Palatinate, a tool believers could use to apply biblical principles to everyday personal lives. The result was the Heidelberg Catechism.

In January of 1563, after the catechism had been drafted, Frederick called the ministers and teachers of the Palatinate together to review the document. They studied and discussed and prayed for eight days and then unanimously approved the new catechism.

The Heidelberg Catechism was instantly popular. Response was as one might anticipate. The Zwinglians and Calvinists generally approved of it. The Roman Catholics objected to it. But the strongest opposition came from the Lutherans. They were led by the minister that Frederick had fired from the church.

The position that the catechism took on the Lord's Supper was Calvinist. The catechism denied the Catholic view and stated that Jesus' body is in heaven but that through the Holy Spirit we are incorporated with Christ in the Lord's Supper.[2]

Eventually, the catechism attracted the attention of the emperor, Maximilian II. The emperor was a Catholic and he ordered Frederick to come to Augsberg to defend his document. Frederick's friends advised him not to go, that it was too dangerous. He could lose his title; he could be imprisoned, he could even be executed. But he went anyway explaining, "There may be danger in store for me at [Augsburg], but I have a comforting hope and trust in my heavenly Father, that he will make me an instrument for his own power… not in word only, but also in deed and truth."

The emperor was a Catholic but he knew that his rule depended on the support of the Protestant electors. He feared this conflict might lead to a civil war. He called Frederick to Augsburg assuming that this troublesome Elector could be silenced. By the time Frederick arrived in Augsburg, the political winds were blowing directly against him. His opposition had been lobbying fiercely. On May 14th, 1566, the charges were read. Frederick was accused of heresy and required to turn from the Reformed faith or face the penalty of banishment. Frederick patiently explained to the assembly the purpose and principles of the catechism. His calm and confidence

[2] Question 80

inspired his opponents. Unexpectedly, the winds shifted and some of the moderate Lutheran princes petitioned the emperor to drop the charges against Frederick. The emperor was also impressed with the character and faithful stubbornness of Frederick (and he was aware of Frederick's strong support with Protestants) that he had all charges acquitted. The emperor went on to nickname him Frederick the Pious.

The story of the Protestant Reformation is a story of heroes—of women and men who out of their love for Christ risked everything to do what they believed to be right. They recognized that the great ship that is the church was off course and they struggled to correct it. Some gave their lives. Frederick was one of these heroes. He risked his great wealth and power to help his people, to defend his faith, to chart a new course for the church. When all the powers of his world were against him, Frederick stood firm, confident in his God. He is a hero of the faith. He earned that nickname Frederick the Pious.