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# THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM ON HUMAN SIN AND MISERY

## ABSTRACT

The Heidelberg Catechism's section on Sin and Misery does not provide a moralistic or legalistic perspective on the human condition. Instead, it offers, in abbreviated format, a restatement of the doctrine of original sin, which points to sin as a condition and not just an act. As such, it invites us to think more deeply about the complexities of the human condition and of human agency.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Among the Reformed confessions of faith, I have had a particular fondness for the Heidelberg Catechism since childhood. I like it, first of all, because of the introductory question and answer: "What is your only comfort in life and in death? That I, with body and soul, both in life and in death, am not my own, but belong to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ ..." <sup>1</sup> This starts the Heidelberg Catechism on a very personal angle which permeates the dogma that will follow. The Heidelberg Catechism is therefore not dry teaching, but warm, pastoral consolation.

This document also appeals to me because of its strong ethical bent: the huge focus on the life of gratitude that follows on the redemption we receive in Christ spoke to my young heart while living in a country where we were faced by huge ethical challenges due to the injustices of the apartheid system, and that focus has remained integral to my understanding of

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1 The Heidelberg Catechism, first published in 1563, consists of two introductory questions and answers, and then three main sections: On Human Misery (3-11), Redemption (12-85), and Thankfulness (86-129). As such, it provides a basic Reformed perspective of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The main author is believed to be Zacharias Ursinus.

theology. As a child, the actual content of the section on gratitude in the Heidelberg Catechism was not as important to me, but the fact that it was there, that it presented ethics as part of faith, was significant to me. It taught me that Christianity is not just about my personal salvation, but about a life transformed by the grace of God. With this emphasis on the life of sanctification, the Heidelberg Catechism retains its personal angle – as such, it is not just about what we know and believe, but about how we live our lives. So, in short, since childhood I have liked the Heidelberg Catechism for its personal and practical nature.

The section on sin and misery, on the other hand, was not always quite so appealing. It was a section to just go over, a sort of preamble before getting to the good stuff of grace. Indeed, it would seem that Ursinus also thought so, for this is the shortest of the three content sections. Moreover, the language used in this section has also often struck readers as being rather moralistic in tone, quite distinct from the pastoral and practical tone found elsewhere in the Catechism.

In what follows, I want to challenge both this aversion to talking about sin, and the accusation that the Heidelberg Catechism's treatment of sin has a moralistic tone. More specifically, by focusing on particular biblical texts cited in this section, I will point out that despite some rhetorical, doctrinal and scriptural problems in this section, the Heidelberg Catechism's presentation of the human situation invites us to think anew about the human situation from a pastoral and practical standpoint.

## 2. REFLECTING ON HUMAN SIN AND MISERY AS A THEOLOGICAL TASK

There is something quite Reformed about not wanting to focus much on sin and misery. The Christian life is a life rooted in the grace of God in Christ and lived daily by the grace of God, *coram Deo*, and for that reason the second and third sections of the Heidelberg Catechism, where the focus is on the justification and sanctification of the Christian, are in a certain sense far more important than the first. Sin should indeed never be the centre of the gospel of grace, nor something we should dwell on in our lives as Christians. That all too easily leads to self-centeredness and moralism. The Reformation is, after all, historically rooted in Luther's recognition that an obsessive dwelling on one's personal sins is the very antithesis of the life that God wants for us. A heavy focus on sin can so easily be sinful, in that it leads us towards ourselves, and as Augustine and later Luther taught, to turn inward and be concerned with our own

well-being too much, to be *incurvatus in se*, is to sin. As such, ironically, to dwell on sin can become sinful!

Nevertheless, the gospel does not bypass sin, and the Reformed Christian needs to take the concept of sin very seriously, even if we are not to dwell on it. There are three reasons for this: first, sin-talk is not the same as moralism; second, sin-talk is intertwined with grace; and third, we have an ethical responsibility to talk of human sin and misery. A few brief comments on each of these.

First, sin-talk is not about a list of do's and don'ts. I will point out below that even when the concept of law enters the picture as that which convicts us of sin, that still does not mean that sin is a simple matter of transgressing legal norms. The original heading for this first content section is not "Sin and Misery" (as it is often translated) but "Von Menschen Elend," i.e., "On Human Misery." Human misery, notes Dirkie Smit (2013:173-188), is more condition than act, something for which we are to be pitied rather than something of which we are to be accused. However, this does not mean that we ought to replace the language of sin with the language of misery. These are not mutually exclusive categories. What we need to do is to talk more deeply about the doctrine of original sin, which is Christianity's own antidote to the language of moralism. In affirming the concept of a fundamental brokenness in our humanity that precedes any actual decisions to commit wrongdoing, the Christian doctrine of original sin speaks the language of human misery, and not simply the language of moralism. More about that below.

The second reason why we cannot just skip this section and go to the "good stuff" of grace, is that theologically, you cannot speak of grace without also speaking of sin. Although, as noted, the Heidelberg Catechism omits the explicit use of the term "sin" in the title of its first content section, it does employ that term in Answer 2 when it presents knowledge of our sin and misery as the first step in knowing the work of Christ in our lives. Moreover, clearly sin is the reason why we are in need of justification and sanctification. So, much as we might like to bypass sin-talk, it is not theologically sound, although of course, how one speaks of sin is very important. It is necessary to talk of sin in relation to grace. Reformed theologian Serene Jones (2000: 95) argues that sin-talk should not be part of our discussion of the doctrine of creation, but rather part of our discussion of soteriology. This would imply that we should not talk of sin as if it is part of our identity. On the contrary, sin is our anti-identity. Our true identity is in Christ, and it is only in the light of this true identity that our sin can be fully understood. As such, all talk of sin should be subsumed under talk of grace. Moreover, the concept of sin has what Mary

McClintock Fulkerson (1991:657) calls a “theocentric grammar,” which invites us to look at sin in terms of our fundamental alienation from God. And if sin-talk is therefore inseparable from talking about God, then it is inseparable from talking about grace, since the God who is revealed in Jesus Christ is the God of grace, is what Catherine Mowry LaCugna (1993) called, God-For-Us.

The third reason why we cannot bypass sin-talk is because it is our ethical responsibility to talk about sin. We cannot reduce the gospel of grace to one of cheap grace, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer so famously remarked. We cannot ignore the human condition of sin and misery and hop, skip, and jump to grace. The love command, that very law that the Heidelberg Catechism says we break when we sin, that very law which provides the basic guideline to the sanctified life, requires us to take seriously the question of human sin and misery. If sin and misery are things to be pitied for, then pity for ourselves and our fellow human beings need to be present in our hearts, a pity that calls us to desire the one who heals our misery, the one whose grace transforms our brokenness into wholeness, and a pity that moves us to live lives of justice, of taking care of the poor and the suffering, of protest against systems of power and oppression that crush the human spirit and break human bodies.

So, sin-talk, although always risky, is also a Christian responsibility. Alistair McFadyen points out that the trivialization of the concept of sin in modern Western culture reflects the fact that “sin” has ceased to function as a way of talking about the pathological in human affairs. The aim of sin-talk, he says, is to speak of *concrete* pathologies in relation to God (McFadyen 2000:3-5). Reflection on sin, when it transcends moralism and the blame game, is reflection on the human condition, on human misery in all its concreteness. It is reflection on our alienation from our true selves, from each other, from the source of our being. However, it is also reflection on the ills that are expressions of this alienation: violence, war, racism, oppression, sexism, heterosexism, greed, abuse... The word of grace that comes to us in Christ speaks into this misery, this world, these concrete pathologies. The Christian cannot bypass reflection on these dark matters. This is particularly true when we reflect on the ills that befall others. I refuse to bypass talk of sin in a world where there are more slaves today than ever before, where millions of women are raped and beaten daily, where millions are starving.<sup>2</sup> And when I utter the language of sin, including the liberation

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2 According to the first modern global survey on slavery, there are currently close to 30 million slaves in the world (despite its illegality). This is more than in 1860, when slavery was still legal in some countries. See <http://www.globalslaveryindex.org>. Accessed August 12, 2014.

theology language of structural sin, I do so in the knowledge that the roots that “have born such terrible fruit lie also within me” (Busch 2010:81).

So, to conclude my prolegomena before I turn to content: if sin is not just a matter of individual acts of moral indiscretion and sin-talk thus not a matter of moralistic preaching; and if sin-talk is theologically intertwined with talk of grace; and if there is an ethical responsibility to reflect on the concrete sin and misery that is part of the human condition; then we cannot bypass this section on human sin and misery in the Heidelberg Catechism. Which leads us to the question: what does the Heidelberg Catechism say in its brief section on human sin and misery? And, does it still have something to say to us today?

### **3. THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM ON HUMAN SIN AND MISERY**

In Answer 2 of the Heidelberg Catechism, sin is introduced as the first of three things that one must know in order to know the comfort of Christ in life and in death. Then, in the section called “On Human Misery,” the Heidelberg Catechism presents a simple argument: we come to know our misery through the law (Q&A 3), that law which requires us to love God and neighbour (Q&A 4). We find that we cannot live according to this law, since we have a “natural tendency” to hate God and neighbour (Q&A 5). This tendency was not part of God’s original creation, since God creates us in God’s image (Q&A 6), but it is the result of the Fall (Q&A 7). Now we are totally unable to do any good unless we are born again by the Spirit of God (Q&A 8). The section ends with 3 questions around the justice and mercy of God (Q&A 9-11), and thus the table is set to introduce the good news of Jesus Christ.

#### **3.1. Law and grace: Romans 7 and Matthew 22**

Obviously I cannot do justice to the whole section On Human Misery, but I want to pause at a few moments that stood out to me in rereading it, with specific focus on some of the text references. First, in answer 3, while the original edition references Romans 3:20, later editions also reference Romans 7:7-25 (specifically v. 7), which state that the consciousness of sin comes through the law. Romans 7 is interesting in this regard, because when it introduces the law as the mirror in which we see our sin, it does so in the context of an emphasis on human helplessness in being in the grip of sin, of a binding of the free will: “for I do not the good I want, but I do

the evil that I do not want" (7:19).<sup>3</sup> This passage expresses something of the existential experience that played a role in Augustine's development of the doctrine of original sin. The text suggests that the hold of sin is more radical than a mere list of moral do's and don'ts would suggest, that it is something that we are in the grip of, and not merely something that we choose. Of course Ursinus' point in this answer was to claim that the law convicts us of sin, and not yet to speak of original sin – that will come later. But this text is interesting, nonetheless, since it indicates that biblically speaking, the sin that we see in the mirror of the law is not a simple matter of legalistic transgressions. This is further highlighted by the summary of the law in Matthew 22, which is referenced in the actual text of Question and Answer 22.

Matthew 22 summarizes the law of God as the command to love God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind and all your strength, and to love your neighbour as yourself. The accompanying texts from the Old Testament are Deut. 6:5, which speaks of loving God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength, and Lev. 19:18, which contains the command to love your neighbour as yourself. I suspect that not many Christians know that the summary of the law that we get from Jesus is based on direct references to the Hebrew Bible. I do not want to make too much of this, and I certainly do not wish to get into the intricacies of questions about continuity between Old Testament law and the New Testament, but I do think it is very interesting that the Heidelberg Catechism here references these Old Testament texts and not only the one from the New Testament. Perhaps it intrigued me because of my Reformed desire to emphasize the continuity, rather than the discontinuity, between the Old and the New Testament. I also find this particularly significant given Christianity's sad history of anti-Semitism, which is at least partially rooted in a reading of Jesus as being the antithesis of Judaism. Modern historical Jesus scholarship has helped us to understand more clearly how deeply rooted Jesus was in Judaism, and how much his particular emphases were already found in Judaism. In Christ non-Jews become the people of God as well, but the God who is revealed in Jesus, is the God who is revealed in the Torah. A greater sensitivity to Judaism teaches us that the law is seen not as a set of legal rules, but as God's gracious gift to humanity. When Christianity teaches that the law is fulfilled in Christ, and that not all

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3 This suggestion that our will is not free, but bound to sin seems to be in tension with Romans 6, where Paul says that we are no longer slaves to sin. The traditional Protestant way of expressing this existential tension is Luther's *simul iustus et peccator*, the insight that we are free from sin, justified by the grace of God, clothed in the alien righteousness of Christ, even as we yet struggle to overcome the reality of sin in our lives, a struggle which is part of our misery.

of the ritual aspects of it need to be kept anymore, it surely is not saying that God's grace is the direct antithesis of the law. Or at least, from a Reformed perspective, it ought not to say that. Reformed theology, unlike the Lutheran tradition, does not see a strong juxtaposition between law and grace. Law is from grace, and indeed it is grace. So, the law which is an expression of God's grace sheds light on our human condition of sin and misery. Grace is not still waiting to show up after the law has convicted us of sin. It is already here in the law. Our sin is seen not through the lens of something that is the antithesis of God's grace, so that we can rush towards that grace out of fear. No, indeed, the law is already God's grace coming to us. Our sin thus becomes known to us in light of God's grace as expressed in the law.

### 3.2. Original sin: Genesis 3

So, the sin that is mirrored in the law is not a simple matter of a set of rules that have been transgressed, but of an existential problem. This insight finds classical expression in the Christian doctrine of original sin. The Heidelberg Catechism includes this doctrine in abbreviated form, and with specific reference to Genesis 3, in Question and Answer 5-7. This section is, however, problematic from a rhetorical, doctrinal, and scriptural standpoint.

Answer 5 argues that we do not live up to the double love command, but have a "natural tendency" to hate God and our neighbours. This is a rhetorically unfortunate way to look at the problem, because most people would not recognize a feeling quite as strong as hate in themselves – even when we hate, we usually don't attribute it to something natural, but to that particular person or group's behaviour (whether this is in fact true or not). Thus the phrase needs explanation – hate does not mean a strong emotion here, but a basic condition of being turned in towards ourselves rather than to God and our fellow human beings. In short, the phrase needs to be understood against the backdrop of Augustine's understanding that sin implies three basic moves: the move toward ourselves, which he calls pride, a move away from God, i.e., rebellion against God, and a move towards the things of this world, or concupiscence (civ. Dei 14.11, 13 etc.). Talk of a "natural tendency" to hate God and neighbour does not adequately convey that.

Moreover, the phrase "by nature" in Answer 5 is doctrinally problematic, because the doctrine of original sin makes clear that sin is not natural, i.e., not part of the nature that God had created in us, but is indeed a deformation of the goodness that is our natural condition. In my view the Heidelberg Catechism comes close to stumbling here in Answer 5, because, in trying to convey one of the basic insights of the doctrine of

original sin, namely Augustine's anti-Pelagian insistence that sin is not just a matter of individual immorality, but indeed a fundamental human problem, something with which we are born, the Heidelberg Catechism *almost* suggests that sin is our natural condition. Of course, in a certain sense it is, but it is not part of nature as God created it, but a distortion of nature. The Heidelberg Catechism then comes to its own rescue in Answers 6 and 7, where it reiterates Augustine's insistence that God did not create us in this manner, but that this deep flaw in human nature is transmitted to us from our primeval ancestors.

While the Heidelberg Catechism here clarifies potential doctrinal misunderstandings that might have arisen from Answer 5, we as modern readers now run into a different problem, the problem of scriptural interpretation. The story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden found in Genesis 3, referenced in Question and Answer 7, is a problematic one today, since a literal reading of this story is now only possible within the fundamentalist corners of Christianity. Moreover, we also know from interaction with Judaism that Genesis 3 was not traditionally read as a story of a primeval human fall from grace. This begs the question: does the doctrine of original sin depend on a traditional reading of Genesis 3? Without pretending to provide a full answer to this conundrum, I want to make a few remarks about the polemical situation out of which the doctrine developed, the influence of other biblical passages besides Gen.3, the influence of church practices, and the existential insights contained in this doctrine. Together, these things suggest that there is a lot more to the doctrine of original sin than the story of Adam and Eve.

### 3.2.1. Polemical situation

Although most scholars recognize the influence of earlier layers of the tradition in Augustine's formulation of the doctrine of original sin, it was undeniably in Augustine that the idea of a universal sinfulness, rooted in a historical event, flowered into a full-blown doctrine (Wiley 2002:37-75). Jaroslav Pelikan points out that this should be at least partially attributed to a *changing polemical context* during Augustine's lifetime. In the centuries before Augustine, and indeed well into his own lifetime, the polemical situation in which Christian theologians operated was characterized by deterministic explanations of the human predicament, such as Gnosticism and Manichaeism. As a result of the emphasis on the *inevitability* of sin and evil in these thought systems, Christian theologians found it necessary to emphasize human responsibility for sin and evil (Pelikan 1971:280-284). Augustine himself, in his polemics against the Manicheans, upheld human responsibility for sin. Yet in his response to Pelagius, Augustine had to

equally uphold the other side of the dialectic, that of the inevitability of sinful choices.

Pelagius, as is well known, was of the opinion that people are born in a condition of freedom from any sinful tendencies that would inevitably result in sin, and thus sin consists only of separate acts of the will, depending in each case on the voluntary choice of the person. Within this view, the very fact that God commands the good is proof that human beings are capable of it. If sin is nonetheless universal, as Pelagius admitted, it is due to wrong education, bad example, and longstanding habits of sinning (Berkhof 1937:132-133).

Although Augustine's formulation of the doctrine of original sin cannot be reduced to a reaction to Pelagius, it cannot be denied that Pelagius' thought on sin (at least as this was understood by Augustine!) provided the most important historical impetus for Augustine's development of the doctrine of original sin. Given this polemical situation, it becomes pretty clear that the doctrine of original sin was not simply a result of an interpretation of Genesis 3.

### 3.2.2. Other biblical texts

Other biblical texts, including Romans 7 and 9, 1 Corinthians 15, and perhaps a mistranslated Romans 5:12, also played a role (Wiley 2002:49-52). Take, for example, Romans 7's insistence that we do not merely commit sin, but are enslaved by it, that our will is not in full control of our actions, that indeed we often do what we do not wish to do, and it becomes abundantly clear that Genesis 3 is not the only significant biblical text in the development of the doctrine of original sin.

### 3.2.3. Church practices

Apart from the polemical situation and the influence of multiple scriptural passages, the doctrine of original sin also arose in response to certain practices and ideas in Christianity that had already developed at that stage. Doctrine often follows upon practice, and not vice versa, much as we would like to pretend otherwise! One of the influences at the time was the emergence of infant baptism. It was from Cyprian that Augustine drew the argument that the practice of infant baptism "proved the presence in infants of a sin that was inevitable, but a sin for which they were nevertheless held responsible" (Pelikan 1971:292). It is important to recognize that the doctrine of original sin did not entirely originate with Augustine – similar ideas had gradually started to develop prior to Augustine. So yes, Genesis 3 most certainly played an important role, but

earlier layers of the tradition and developing practices in the church, led Augustine to affirm, in contrast to Pelagius, humanity's bondage to sin due to the "Fall," even while upholding human responsibility for actual sin.

### 3.2.4. Existential insights

Finally, the doctrine of original sin expresses certain existential truths that go well beyond the simple story of Adam, Eve, and the eating of forbidden fruit. Paul Rigby (1987:7) argues that the doctrine of original sin was to a large extent derived from Augustine's personal experience of sin and salvation, and as such it was a matter of existential, and not merely dogmatic or exegetical insight. I would even suggest that instead of seeing Genesis 3 as a source text for the doctrine of original sin, one could read it as expressive of the sense of alienation from self and God and other that we often experience in our lives. The story is therefore not a history of how that alienation came to be, but the story, like the doctrine, expresses an instinctive human awareness that things are "not the way it's supposed to be" (Plantinga 1996).

Tatha Wiley (2002:9) notes that the reduction of the meaning of the doctrine of original sin to the story of Adam and Eve has "overshadowed the fundamental reality to which Christian teaching points," which is that evil "is a feature of our existence prior to our personal choices and decisions." In the twentieth century, theologians such as Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich have tried to replace the historical account of "Adam and Eve" and their Fall with existentialist categories. Original sin as *event* has thus receded into the background. But the issue of original sin as *condition* is more complex, for although it shifts the focus away from problematic literal readings of texts that really ought not to be read as such, it also clashes with modern sensibilities. Alistair McFadyen (2000:20-21) notes that the recognition of sin as "a being rather than a doing,"

... offends against the most fundamental, twin tenets of natural, rational and just moral order: that we are held to account only for our own free acts, what we have done (which are acts of our person) and that which we could have avoided doing. The doctrine of original sin posits that we inherit sin in the form of guilt for others' actions; that there has been a total and universal moral collapse which make avoidance of sin impossible; and that we are yet accountable for this situation and for our individual acts of sin which this situation preconditions us to commit.<sup>4</sup>

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4 I should note that I don't think describing Augustine's view of sin as "a being rather than a doing" is adequate, since Augustine also emphasized human responsibility for sin in his polemics against the Manicheans, and his rejection

Part of the problem here is that we often operate with an individualistic understanding of moral agency. There is also too much of a focus on the issue of blame: instead of recognizing human misery and of taking responsibility, we tend to blame others (often gleefully) or wallow in feelings of guilt about our own sins. Many modern Christians are *de facto* Pelagians, with an insufficient understanding of the fact that we are imbedded in, situated in, indeed formed by, each other, including each other's sin and misery. The doctrine of original sin offends because it is often read from a moralistic standpoint, as if it blames people for something they did not do. There is an insufficient understanding of the fact that it expresses our brokenness. There is something really profound in Augustine's insight that we are born with this, and that it nevertheless is ours. As Friedrich Schleiermacher (1989:288) put it, sin is

common to all; not something that pertains severally to each individual and exists in relation to him by himself, but in each the work of all, and in all the work of each; and only in this corporate character indeed, can it be properly and fully understood.

Alistair McFadyen's analysis is helpful to summarize the basic human insights of the doctrine of original sin. He says that sin, in this view, is contingent, radical, communicable, and universal (McFadyen, 2002:16) In other words, the doctrine of original sin says, first of all, that human beings were not created sinful, but that sin is a distortion and not an expression of human nature. Sin is a contingent reality, not a necessary part of creation. The doctrine, secondly, holds that sin's reality and hold on people are radical. As such, sin is primarily a serious situation in which we find ourselves, and only secondarily an individual act. Thirdly, sin effects a fundamental distortion of the conditions of sociality through which we are "called into personhood." Thus, before we are capable of performing morally culpable acts, sin constructs our very personhood. This distorted reality may be expressed in terms of alienation from the divine and each other – that which the Heidelberg Catechism so unfortunately calls "a natural tendency to hate God and neighbour." Finally, this distorted reality is universally extensive, both as a condition and as an actualizing possibility. McFadyen writes that this universality of sinning represents more than the claim that no-one so far has avoided actually committing sin – which would be a Pelagian argument. Instead, the doctrine of original sin implies

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of an ontology of evil would also, in my view, preclude a description of the related concept of sin as a "being rather than doing." The language is just unfortunate there. Perhaps something like "a condition that leads to a doing" might be better.

a universal solidarity in sin which is certainly exhibited in, but is neither simply the product of nor reducible to, the fact that all do, in fact, perform sinful acts (McFadyen 2002:16-17).

Augustine understood that the locus of sin is not the act itself – the act is, rather, an expression of how this particular individual participates in humanity’s corporate disunity with the divine. Yes, modern science and critical readings of the Bible make some of Augustine’s premises obsolete. But they cannot erase the existential truths contained in his perspective – the truth that we are fundamentally opaque to ourselves, that our decisions are shaped by our participation in the corporate reality of humanity and the social structures created by the human race, but that we nevertheless have a measure of free will and are not merely victims of fate.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, is the language with which the Heidelberg Catechism introduces us to human sin and misery still relevant? The answer, in short, is yes, *and* no. “No” in the sense that the Catechism does sometimes fall into a rhetorically and doctrinally unfortunate trap when it talks of being prone by nature to hate God and neighbour, and “no” in the sense that resting the rich doctrinal insights of the doctrine of original sin on a problematic text like Genesis 3 simply does not hold up to scrutiny. But “yes” also. The Heidelberg Catechism does not offer us the language of moralism when it speaks of human misery – which has often been an accusation levelled against it. Instead, it offers us the language of original sin, however briefly, which invites us to move beyond moralism and into reflection on the complexities of human misery and human moral agency. And while the Heidelberg Catechism does not go into the direction of reflection on concrete human pathologies, I would argue that the language of original sin does invite us to go there as well, since it does not merely talk of sin as condition but also of sin as expressed in actual deeds. The Heidelberg Catechism furthermore invites us to think more creatively about the law of God, and how it is the gift of grace that shows us our brokenness, not to break us further, but to lead us to the One Who Heals. Despite its sometimes old-fashioned language, there remains a pastoral and practical tone in the Heidelberg Catechism, even in its reflections on human sin and misery. And it remains an open invitation to think further, to ponder more deeply, about the human situation as we experience it today.

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Heidelberg Catechism

Sin

Misery

**Trefwoorde**

Heidelbergse Kategismus

Sonde

Ellende