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# FREEDOM IN THE SENSE OF THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM – AN ORIENTATION IN THE PROBLEMS OF MODERN LIBERTY

## ABSTRACT

The Heidelberg Catechism courageously mentions that Christians participate in the work of Christ as the eternal king. This means that, during their life on earth, Christians fight against sin “with a free conscience”. These words anticipate the call for human rights in the French Revolution. Although the Catechism uses the word “free” only at this point, the text shows the context in which we have to understand “freedom”. It instructs us that we have to understand the word not as a freedom “from” and, therefore, not as freedom only for myself, but as freedom “for” a life with others. The reason for this is that real freedom is founded in the gift of the divine liberator, who loves us only along with our neighbours. We are free in relation to God and our fellow human beings.

## 1. “A FREE CONSCIENCE”

The subject of my article is “Freedom in the sense of the Heidelberg Catechism”. This theme is perhaps surprising to those who know little about the Catechism. Because the word “free” is found only once in the entire text, this is still so significant that it is worthwhile examining Article 32 in which that word is used. Article 31 explains why *Jesus* is also named *Christ* (Greek: *Christos*; Hebrew: *maschiach*, messiah; English: the anointed). This expression draws on the custom in the times of the Old Testament whereby a priest or a king was called Christ in the course of his duties, and a prophet poured oil over his head. Article 31 refers to Hebrews 1:9, which states that Jesus became “anointed” with the Holy Spirit by God the Father, “with the oil of gladness”, and thus became consecrated as the

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Christ. He was appointed as the messiah neither by a human being, nor by a servant of God, but by God Himself. He is the messiah, the Christos in his exercise of the three offices, namely the chief Prophet and Teacher, the only High Priest, and the eternal King, who governs us by His Word and Spirit.<sup>1</sup>

Article 32 explains that a Christian is a member of Christ, of his body, by his faith. Therefore, he has a part in Christ's "anointment" as the one messiah. In Joel 3, it is mentioned that God will pour out His spirit on all human beings, as noted in the margin of the Catechism. According to first John 2:27, every Christian has received such anointment. Pay attention to the really sensational formulation! It means a break with a thought in the Middle Ages, which currently still haunts some people. In the church of Christ, the especially consecrated office-bearers are superior to the ordinary Christians. Article 32 breaks with this and speaks along the lines of grassroots democracy: *I am a Christian, "because I am a member of Christ by faith", by my faith and not by a clerical intermediary person.* Among the Protestant Christians in the Czech Republic, the unchecked, direct access of every Christian to God was one of the most important discoveries during the Reformation. Martin Luther was the first to use the notion of "free conscience" – on the Reichstag of Worms 1521. However, he said this in a certain sense so that his conscience is bound to the word of God, according to the Bible. The Catechism followed it and developed a broader meaning for that notion. The connection of Christians with Christ, as members of him, causes them to also be connected with the three offices of Christ. They do not do the same as He does, but they are active in corresponding with Him. They are not merely receivers, but also busy, in their own decisions, and indeed in correspondence with His activity, as thankful answer to His merciful affection towards us. This corresponds to the work of Christ as the chief Prophet and Teacher, "that I also may confess His Name". According to the New Testament, we have to understand this as a responsible evidence of His word and work among human beings. In this instance, the Catechism refers to the earnest word of Jesus in the context of his call to follow Him: "For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed" (Mark 8:38).

This corresponds to the work of the only High Priest, who has given Himself for us, as an answer to it: "I present myself a living sacrifice of thankfulness to Him", or as in the letter to the Romans 12:1: "that you will give your bodies as a living offering, holy, pleasing to God". And we turn to the work of the eternal King, "who governs us by His Word and

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1 According to <http://ebible.org/web/HEB01.htm> - FN5Article 31.

Spirit, and defends and preserves us in the redemption obtained for us". According to the Catechism, this corresponds to the following, that "with a free conscience I may fight against sin and the devil in this life, and hereafter in eternity reign with Him over all creatures".

This action happens "with a *free conscience*", which was written in the first edition of the Catechism (1563). The Swiss theologian Karl Barth remarked in his commentary to the Catechism that the French Revolution, at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century with its call for human rights, would not have been necessary (as it was in reality), had Christianity at least understood this and followed it sufficiently. At that time, Frederick Schiller let the Marquis of Posa tell the King: "Allow freedom of thought, Sire." As early as in 1545, John Calvin wrote in his Catechism of Geneva about the meaning of Christ's Kingship for us Christians that we are freed by the charity of God to a life in "freedom of the conscience (*in libertatem conscientiarum*)" (Article 42). This phrase is certainly to be understood not as an allowance for acts at random and arbitrariness. But, both Calvin and the Heidelberg Catechism accept it as the prerequisite of the fact that we *ourselves* fight in this life with our possibilities and our insight "against the sin and the devil", or let us say: against the power of the darkness and of the downfall. The Catechism adds that, in the future, we will reign with Christ over all creatures. This formulation refers to 2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy: "If we go on to the end (still suffering), then we will be ruling with him (with Christ)." This reminds us of Genesis 1:28, where God speaks to the human beings, created in his own image: "Be masters of (the other creatures); be rulers over ... every living thing moving on the earth." We should take note of what is written in Genesis 2:15, namely that human beings are ordered by God not to destroy the other creature, but "to dress it and to keep it", that is: the world in which we live. We have to do it in a conscientious freedom and in a free conscientiousness.

## 2. MANY DIFFERENT MEANINGS OF "FREEDOM"

The above is by far not everything that the Catechism considers as "freedom", even if it is expressed only indirectly. We must note that freedom can mean something very different and vice versa. I will explain this by means of an example: "Freedom" has, according to Martin Luther King jr., quite another meaning than the same word at the same time in the mouth of the governor of Alabama, George Wallace, who fought resolutely for upholding segregation. In this instance, it meant the liberation from the unjust suppression, and there it meant a tolerance of the ruling situation, which resists such a liberation. Another freedom is economic liberalism,

which currently rules globally and, by contrast to it is the freedom, about which is written in the globally important Belhar Confession (1986):

that God calls the church to follow him ... for God brings justice to the oppressed and gives bread to the hungry; that God frees the prisoner and restores sight to the blind; that God supports the downtrodden, protects the stranger, helps orphans and widows and blocks the path of the ungodly.

Indeed, the notion of “freedom” is not clear. According to the painter Kokoschka; “Freedom has become a notion like a chewing gum – at every tollgate, people understand something other by it.” But we are allowed to reduce the many meanings to two different ones. On the one hand, there is a concept, according to which freedom is an exemption from. You are considered to be free, when you are free *from* duties, *from* rules, *from* work, or even *from* close relationships. Therefore, currently many like to live as singles – in Germany 15 million adults. Many believe that they are only free when they can do whatever they like. This is not without consequence. For the liberty *from* is based on the idea that I am free, when I am independent from others and free *for myself*, as far as possible. But the others also want to be free in this sense; they also want to be independent from me. This causes a rat race where many are losers and some are winners, and where others trample on those who are down below, and bow to those who are on the top. This struggle emerges from a theory and a practice in which free people first think of themselves. At present, we view the reality of it directly. Humanity is in danger of dying out because of this. The theologians support this by interpreting the biblical law of love as I will love only when I love at first *myself*.

### 3. FREEDOM FOR OTHERS

There is another understanding of freedom, namely I am so free. This is essentially not a freedom from, but a freedom *for* others, decisively not for me, but for our neighbours; being connected with them, I am also free for myself. It is a freedom not independent from them, but in relationship with them, not in concurrence with them, but in communication with them, not at other people’s expense, but in favour of them. This kind of freedom stands against the threat of human beings by bondage. However, only those who live in the first kind of liberty are not free, although they believe that they are free. The Austrian poet, Maria von Ebner-Eschenbach, wrote: “The happy slaves are the most angered enemies of freedom”. They are most angered, because they wish to remain in their wrong liberty. “The slave does not want to be free, but to be a slave-holder”. This sentence explains

the words of Martin Luther King in his fight against the suppression of the Afro-American people in the US, namely that not only the suppressed, but also the suppressors need liberation. We note that the difference in interpretation of “freedom” is not a mere play of words, but it is essential for our life and even for global survival, whether we use it in this way or in the other. Now we are able to understand why it is not a problem that the Heidelberg Catechism only uses the notion “freedom” once. It speaks indirectly about it by showing the connections and contexts that emphasise the good and the right meaning of freedom. In so doing, the Catechism helps orientate us “in the problems of modern liberty”.

#### 4. FREEDOM AS A GIFT

It is noteworthy that the helpful view of the Catechism in this matter is written in the third section of the text entitled “About the thankfulness”, and this follows the sections on the misery of man and his redemption. The three sections are composed in a Trinitarian mode. Already in its first article, the third section mentions that Christ “renews us by *His Spirit* after His own image” (Article 86). However, already in the *second* part of the Catechism, the works of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are explained. We read about the Holy Spirit that His work is our sanctification (Article 24). This means that He makes us “partakers of Christ” (Article 53). In the third main section of the Catechism, the work of the Holy Spirit to *renew* us after Christ’s image is aimed at the following: “that with our whole life we show ourselves *thankful* to God for His blessing”. In this instance, we observe that, in the work of the Holy Spirit, His conjunction from us with Christ and our thankfulness for this, belong together. Let us hear more about it! We will understand then that different notions are the context in which we have to understand “freedom”, even when the word is not used.

##### 4.1 Free as liberated by Christ

Article 86 mentions first that Christ has “redeemed us by His blood”; that is: he has freed us from the power of the darkness which ties our hands and feet and heads, and that we are renewed by His Spirit. This means that, by His authority, we are put on a new, hopeful way. According to the Catechism, it happened to us “without any merit of ours”; we do not have to fulfil any conditions required of us. We are not able to contribute something to it. We can merely receive it. This is theologically right. But it raises a question: Does this not make us irresponsible? Are we really free, when we do not liberate ourselves, when somebody else does it instead of us? The question seems good, but it is asked too rashly. In the line of the

Catechism we have to answer: We need to be drawn to freedom in order to act as free men and women. We are too deeply involved in the powers of the evil that we only have to be grateful for the liberation which God only has done and does. The Catechism asks itself: When it is so, “why must we do good works?” The text replies that the question is indeed already answered, namely “that with our whole life we show ourselves thankful to God for His blessing, and that He be glorified through us”.

Thankful implies that we give a cheerful answer with all our thoughts, words, deeds, and even sighs, because we know the One who hears them. God is more “glorified through us”, as if we give Him such an answer. The the Belhar Confession explains the inseparable relation between that which God alone has done for us, and that which we can and should do as our active response to His word and work:

We believe that *God’s* life-giving Word and Spirit has conquered the powers of sin and death, and therefore also irreconcilability and hatred, bitterness and enmity, (and) that God’s life-giving Word and Spirit will enable the church to live in a new obedience which can open new possibilities of life for society and the world.

## 4.2 Free in joy

We are as free as those who are made free, but in such a way that we are free to walk upright. The freedom, given to us, is really our freedom. And this freedom is a freedom not only inside, but also in activity. It has a shape, which human beings do not have otherwise. It is the freedom for “heartfelt sorrow for sin, causing us to hate and turn from it always more and more”, according to Article 89. Before we are made free to confess it, we do not want to admit it. Then we believe that we can settle the mistake somehow alone. Meanwhile, we like to be busy with the mistakes of others and cover our own sins up this way. On the contrary, it is like daybreak, when we become free, to beat our chest and to speak like the prodigal son: “I have sinned”. It is interesting to note that Article 89 in the Catechism refers us to the Prophet Joel, to his wonderful words in Chapter 2: “Rend your heart ... Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity.”

Article 90 states that “making alive of the new man” means: Heartfelt joy in God through Christ, causing us to take delight in living according to the will of God in all good works.

The men and women who do good works are those, who rather know that they are human beings, against whom you always find many facts to complain about. They are weak; maybe they stumbled, and make false

steps. But, as such, they are made free to enjoy that God will make use of their service, that is to live according to His will. With it they fulfil good works. As such, many have not yet discovered that the New Testament explains that we are not saved by our works, but it is always obvious in all sections, even in the letters of Paul, that in the faith we are free to do *good works*.

### 4.3 Free in obedience to God

Let us examine the following in Article 90 of the Catechism: to live “according to God’s will”. The new life is a life in freedom, a freedom lived in an insoluble relationship with God. If I break away from this connection, I leave the reality of my freedom. According to a widespread idea, the notions “freedom” and “obedience” describe a contrast. This is correct most of the time. But, in relation to God, both notions belong together. When you obey Him, when you listen to Him, when you follow His words and show that you belong to Him, then you are free, not as a slave, but as a human being who is able to make his/her own thoughts and decisions in this relationship. Calvin already considered the meaning of the following, namely that the commandments of God are given to a people who previously suffered and were suppressed under the terrible laws of the Pharaoh. Because the people are now liberated from these laws, the commandments do not have the same meaning as the Egyptian laws. According to Calvin, “the Lord intimates that they were *delivered* from miserable bondage, that they might learn to yield ... *obedience* to Him as the author of their *freedom*” (*Institutio* II 8,15). I am of the opinion that the Heidelberg Catechism follows Calvin in this understanding of the close relationship between freedom and obedience to God, but using other words.

Article 89 states that we have to do good works. Article 91 raises the following question: “What are good works?” The answer is: “Those only which proceed from true faith, and are done according to the law of God”. It must be noted that, in this instance, not only is the word “law” mentioned, but Article 91 mentions three words “law of God”. There is obviously a difference between the human laws and the divine laws. We can question the human laws critically in the light of God’s commandments or we may even refuse them. It is more important that at least the divine law is a helpful and merciful commandment which we can follow with thankfulness. According to Article 86, we have to live so “that with our whole life we show ourselves thankful to God for His blessing”. We could say that thankfulness corresponds to freedom, for freedom refers to our liberator, who has saved and redeemed us in Christ by His self-sacrifice

on the cross, according to Article 86. It is clear for the Catechism that our thankfulness is the opposite of self-praise. It is impossible to use our good works, done in that thankfulness, for our self-adulation. They would then not be good. They are only good, because they and we in them praise and extol the Lord. Article 91 mentions that the good works “are done unto God’s glory”, while Article 86 states that by them God is “glorified through us”. In addition, we are invited to turn to 1 Corinthians 10:31: “Do it all for the glory of God”, and to Matthew 5:16 where Jesus encourages his disciples: “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.”

For the Catechism, freedom is freedom in such a relationship to God.

#### 4.4 Free in love

In Article 91, we read that we as Christians must follow only “the law of God”, but not “the commandments of men”. Does this mean that we have to despise or mistrust them generally? In that case, we would not be free in relation to others. The Catechism shows us another way to deal with them: We have to love them. According to the words of Jesus, the right freedom against men and women is the love for them. However, not all forms of love are really love. Article 4 mentions that the law of God is that taught by Christ – who is God and man in one person. According to Him, His law has two dimensions. We have to love first the Lord, our God, with our whole heart and then our neighbour. This implies that we have to love our neighbour, whoever s/he is, and whether we like him/her or not, whether s/he is related or a stranger to us. The two dimensions of this law of God belong together, and are inseparable. However, they are not the same (Article 93). We must love, fear, and honour first God more than all creatures (Article 94), meaning that He defines what kind of love for our neighbour is good and necessary in the various situations in our life. But, at the same time, the love for God gives us the energy and power to love our neighbours. We are really free human beings attending to them. As long as we are fixated on ourselves, we are not free.

The right freedom is essentially a social freedom. We are free in the love for our neighbours, in accordance with the Ten Commandments. We are free in obedience to God and His love for his creatures. In their second section, the Ten Commandments mention our relation to our fellow human beings (from which we may learn to keep good company with other living beings). Let us briefly examine the interesting interpretations of those texts. We find a helpful remark regarding the rule not to work on the Sabbath. To this is added that we learn “that all the days of my life I rest from my evil works”. This formulation does not support the thesis of Max Weber

that the so-called Calvinism was the root of modern capitalism, which does not disdain evil works. In addition, the sentence in the exegesis with respect to the commandment to honour our ancestors by being patient with their weaknesses and mistakes is helpful. This teaches us to keep wise company with them. Many suffer from their ancestors. They do not have to negate them, but they must attempt to come to terms with them. In addition, as far as the prohibition of stealing is concerned, we read in the Catechism (Article 110) that God forbids “also all covetousness *and* the ... waste of His gifts”. This speaks to the problems of our time. On the one hand, this speaks against the refusal to share our property with the poor in so many countries. On the other hand, this alludes to the dramatic destruction of the environment, and even the threatening ecocide. We must remember that this is written under the headline “Thankfulness”! We become sufficiently free in order to follow God’s commandments.

#### 4.5 Free in limitations

To freedom also belongs the courage to accept that we are limited creatures. We are allowed to do what we can in our life. But whatever we do, will be seriously imperfect, and we live in an imperfect world. In its last section, the Catechism speaks about prayer. We open to the eternal God, “we thoroughly know our need and misery, so as to humble ourselves in the presence of His divine majesty” (Article 117). We are still aimlessly wandering back and forth. In the interpretation of the Lord’s Prayer, we hear that we are on the way, “until the fullness of Your kingdom come, wherein You shall be all in all” (Article 123). Article 127 states that we are in a hard fight, “until finally complete victory is ours”. Both statements belong together. Not we as human beings will win, but God in His Saviour will be victorious. But we will share in His victory. In this instance, the Catechism follows Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians (3:13; 5:23sq). What will this victory be? The Catechism mentions this in Article 52. We will walk towards the last judge. This means that we are dismissed at the latest as judges. Until then, we are considerably arrogant. We have felt to be better than others, and with such pride we judge ourselves as excellent fellows. But when the last judge appears, we will lose our pride or think critically about ourselves.

As we get older, we feel that so much of what we have done in the short time of our life was useless and wrong or worthless. With regard to this, the Catechism points us to the light that there is a good reason: “that in all my sorrows and persecutions, I, *with uplifted head*, look for the very One who offered Himself for me to the judgment of God, and removed all curse from me” (Article 52).

Surely, this is valid not only for the poor, but also for those in their solidarity with the poor. The fulfilment of the hope for all, to which we may wait “with uplifted head”, is founded in the time of the New Testament, when Jesus on the cross said: “All is done. And with his head bent he gave up his spirit” (John 19:30). This hope enables us to do that which was quoted at the beginning of this article – it gives us the courage that the followers of Jesus “with a free conscience may fight against sin and the devil in this life, and hereafter in eternity reign with Him over all creatures” (Article 32).

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