

Dutch Treat

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Annotations to the Heidelberg Catechism by Jan van Bruggen (Neerlandia, Alberta: Inheritance Publications)

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Annotations to the Heidelberg Catechism is the 1991 English translation of the Dutch work by Jan van Bruggen (1909-1965). It is published primarily for use in the Canadian Reformed Churches as a teaching tool for catechizing covenant youth in the family and church.

For those of you who may not be familiar with the Heidelberg Catechism, the one-hundred twenty-nine questions of the catechism are divided into fifty-two Lord's Days for a year's worth of reading. The catechism (1563) is one part of the Reformed churches' "Three Forms of Unity", the other two being the Belgic Confession (1561) and the Canons of Dort (1618-19). The Heidelberg Catechism covers many of the same doctrines that are dealt with in the later Westminster Shorter (1647) and Larger (1648) Catechisms.

Van Bruggen's division of the Heidelberg Catechism into its various parts is not mentioned in the table of contents. It should be; it is excellent. As you page through the book you will discover this partitioning of the text: An introduction (Lord's Day 1); Part I: Our Sin and Misery (Lord's Days 2-4); Part II: Our Deliverance (Lord's Days 5-31); Part III: Our Thankfulness (Lord's Days 32-52). These three parts are also sub-divided into appropriate headings which are too numerous to list here. Part II contains an exposition of the Heidelberg Catechism's teaching on the Apostles' Creed and the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper, and Part III an exposition of the Ten Commandments and Lord's Prayer.

The chapters in this book are broken down into several sections. Usually only one question and answer from the catechism is addressed per section, although some Q&As are lumped together when they speak to a single topic, as in the sacraments of Baptism (Q&As 69-74) and the Lord's Supper (Q&As 75-82).

The shortest expositions contain only two sections: the first called "Notes" followed by

one titled “Questions”. Other expositions expand into various sections as the author deemed them necessary. They are “Comments”, “Cross References” (to the other confessional standards), and “Heresies” (where the doctrines of the church are shown to contrast with certain false teachings). In the sections dealing with the sacraments van Bruggen also comments on the Reformed church's “Form for the Baptism of Infants” and “Form for the Celebration of the Lord's Supper.” There are also three Addenda scattered throughout the book dealing with “Revelation” and “Holy Scripture” (Addenda to Q&A 19), and “Predestination” (Addendum to Part II).

In general the “Notes” section takes up each point made in the Heidelberg Catechism Q&As and explains it in simple language. These notes are well written, clear, and for the most part easy to understand. Some sections in which the discussion revolves around the particular polity of the Canadian Reformed Church or Dutch church history do assume more knowledge of the subjects than non-Dutch readers may have. There are footnotes to explain these concepts where the editors thought such clarification was needed. By and large, the exposition displays a depth of knowledge of the doctrines of the reformed faith conveyed in easily grasped concepts. It is a pleasure to read such deep truths of the faith expressed in plain language that parents and their children should be able to understand.

Van Bruggen comes down squarely on the orthodox position on almost all issues presented in this book. He defends the doctrine of original sin, six-day creation, the Holy Trinity, the two natures of Christ, presuppositional apologetics, election, predestination, the bodily resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and many, many more solidly reformed teachings. He attacks the day-age theory of creation, Arminianism, Pelagianism, Perfectionism, Universalism, Hierarchy, Cæsaropapism, Congregationalism, Ecumenism, Synodocracy, Barthianism, Evolutionism, Polytheism, Atheism, Materialism, Agnosticism, Judaism, Sabellianism, Mohammedanism, Modernism, and Millennialism just to name a few entries in the heresies sections.

It is all the more surprising, therefore, to find van Bruggen himself promoting two modern day false teachings. The first of these is found in his exposition of Lord's Day 2 where he promotes the false idea that Jesus taught three commandments instead of two in Matthew 22:34-40: 1) love God, 2) love your neighbor, and 3) love yourself. Van Bruggen contradicts Jesus by making the saying “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” mean, “We must love ourselves...” (p. 30) when Christ actually taught that we are to take the intensity with which we already love ourselves too much and direct all that energy toward loving our neighbor.¹ There are only two commandments here (Matthew 22:40), not three, and van Bruggen's comments deny and obscure that fact.

The most shocking deviation from the reformed view of things is found in his statements on the doctrine of Baptism. Though van Bruggen does uphold and defend infant baptism, he differs from our presbyterian view regarding the mode of baptism. Van Bruggen says,

¹ See Jay E. Adams *The Biblical View of Self-Esteem, Self-Love, & Self-Image* Harvest House 1986, pp. 63-73.

“In earlier times it was customary to baptise by immersion. John the Baptist and the Apostles, for example, did this. Latter (in colder climates and because of the baptism of infants!) sprinkling with water became the custom. Baptism by sprinkling is not wrong.... Nevertheless, it is true that the symbolism is richer with immersion.” (p. 177)

Such a statement about the baptisms in the New Testament being performed by immersion is not altogether accurate, it is merely his supposition based on his view of the doctrine. He has followed the immersionists' argument at this point in accepting that Romans 6:3-4 is dealing with the mode of water baptism rather than understanding that it “stresses the completeness of identification with Christ in his death ... and prepares for that which is to follow in the latter part of [verse 4], namely, union with Christ in his resurrection....”² Despite this error regarding the mode of baptism practiced in the Bible and the early church, the rest of the chapter on Baptism is excellent, as van Bruggen cites Prof. Lucas Lindeboom's conclusion that “Baptism does not sign and seal what is PRESENT IN the person being baptized, or what IS PRESUPPOSED to be present, but the promises of the covenant of grace, revealed in the gospel.” (p. 179)

Finally, Presbyterians should be aware that the Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 44 differs from the Westminster Larger Catechism Q&A 50 in its interpretation of the phrase from the Apostles' Creed “He descended into hell.” The Larger Catechism points out that the descent into hell took place *after* Jesus' death on the cross, and consisted in His burial, and in His continuing in the state of the dead, and under the power of death, for three days. Both the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England³ and the Westminster Larger Catechism directly refer the descent into hell to the events which took place after Christ's death on the cross (i.e., to His burial, to His continuing in the state of the dead, and under the power of death, for three days). Other Protestant confessions also mention it in order following His death and burial without comment as to its meaning.⁴ The Heidelberg Catechism refers Christ's descent into hell to His suffering the pains of hell while upon the cross.⁵

2 John Murray *The Epistle to the Romans* The New International Commentary on the New Testament, Wm. B Eerdmans Publishing Co., [1968] 1971, p. 215. Murray goes on to add, “The assumption of so many commentators, non-baptist as well as baptist, to the effect that the apostle has in view the mode of immersion as vividly portraying our burial with Christ and emergence with him in his resurrection is without warrant.” p. 215, footnote 3.

3 Article 3 [1562] read: “As Christ died for us, and was buried; so also it is to be believed, that he went down into hell.” This statement was revised by the Westminster Assembly in 1643 to read: “As Christ died for us, and was buried, so it is to be believed that he continued in the state of the dead, and under the power and dominion of death, from the time of his death and burial until his resurrection; which hath been otherwise expressed thus:...He went down into hell.” Peter Hall, ed., *The Harmony of Protestant Confessions* Still Waters Revival Books [1842] 1992, p. 506.

4 All of the following references are to pages in *The Harmony of Protestant Confessions* cited above: *The Confession of Basle*, Article 4, p. 91; *The Confession of England*, Article 2, p. 97; *The Confession of Scotland*, Article 10, p. 100; *The Confession of Augsburg*, Article 3, p. 105; *The Confession of Sueveland*, Article 2, Section 2, p. 107.

5 Question 44 of the Heidelberg Catechism reads: “why is there added, 'he descended into hell?'” The answer is: “That in my greatest temptations, I may be assured, and wholly comfort myself in this, that my Lord Jesus Christ, by his inexpressible anguish, pains, terrors, and hellish agonies, in which he was plunged during all his sufferings, but especially on the cross, hath delivered me from the anguish and

Does the Bible teach that Jesus “descended into hell” while upon the cross, suffering the pains of death and hell in the place of His people (see Psalm 116:3), or does it teach that He “descended into hell” by remaining under the power of death for a time? Dr. Charles Hodge makes the case that the words must be understood in the light of their context in the Apostles' Creed (that they were introduced in the fourth century as explanatory of the clause “He was dead and buried”) and in light of the usage of the terms Sheol and Hades in the Bible (both of which may refer to the grave or unseen world), and that they cannot be understood of His suffering the pains of hell on the cross because of their position in the Creed. He states: “It would utterly incongruous to say, 'He was dead, buried, and suffered extreme agony.' when it is admitted that his sufferings ended upon the cross.”⁶

With these caveats in mind, those who love the Reformed Faith should buy this book and use it during the following year to train themselves and their children in the truths of our holy religion.

torments of hell.” *The Commentary of Dr. Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism*, reprint of the 1852 edition by Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, n.d. p. 228. See also Ursinus's comments on this doctrine on pages 228-232.

6 Charles Hodge *Systematic Theology* Volume 2, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., reprinted 1973, pp. 615-625.