

## "In Life and Death We Belong to God"

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<sup>1</sup>Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions. <sup>2</sup>Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. <sup>3</sup>Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat; for God has welcomed them. <sup>4</sup>Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand. <sup>5</sup>Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. <sup>6</sup>Those who observe the day, observe it in honor of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honor of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honor of the Lord and give thanks to God. <sup>7</sup>**We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves.** <sup>8</sup>**If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's.** <sup>9</sup>For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living. <sup>10</sup>Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. <sup>11</sup>For it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God." <sup>12</sup>So then, each of us will be accountable to God.  
(Romans 14:1-12, emphasis added)

In 1609, as the English captain Henry Hudson guided his ship the "Half Moon" back down the river that now bears his name, he regretted that he would not be returning to Europe with the news he had hoped to bring.<sup>1</sup> He had not found the elusive Northwest Passage that the Dutch Republic had sent him to find. The best news he would be bringing back to them was that beavers were plentiful in the new land he had explored. Based on these reports, private commercial missions would quickly return to the New World, anxious to cash in on valuable furs that were in such high demand in Europe.<sup>2</sup> All of these Dutch ships, including the Half Moon, were primarily manned by Reformed Protestants. Together with their Bibles, these sailors carried with them a document that expressed the basic tenets of their faith. As Europe was descending into a protracted and bloody religious war, these early Calvinists waded this document onto the shores of Manhattan Island, where a trading post named New Amsterdam would soon be formed. It was certainly borne by Jonas Michaelius, the first minister who arrived at the new colony in 1628.<sup>3</sup> The document would provide the new settlers with a firm foundation for their views on sin and grace, faith and government, redemption and freedom.<sup>4</sup> Today, we call this document the Heidelberg Catechism, and it remains one of the confessional statements that define us as Presbyterians.

Of all of our confessions, the Heidelberg Catechism is by far the most personal.<sup>5</sup> It begins with a simple but powerful question that goes right to the heart of every individual: "What is your only comfort, in life and in death?" The answer given is this: "That I belong—body and soul, in life and in death—not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ..." This idea has remained so central to our identity in Christ over the centuries that a paraphrase of this question and answer inspired

<sup>1</sup> Jack Rogers, *Presbyterian Creeds: A Guide to the Book of Confessions*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox (1991), 96.

<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New\\_Amsterdam](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Amsterdam)

<sup>3</sup> John H. Leith, *Introduction to the Reformed Tradition*, Atlanta: John Knox (1981), 46.

<sup>4</sup> Rogers, 105.

<sup>5</sup> Rogers, 96.

the opening words of one of our most recent confessions, "A Brief Statement of Faith," which affirms that, still today, *"In life and death, we belong to God."*

The idea is firmly rooted in the words of Paul that we read this morning. *"We do not live to ourselves,"* Paul writes, *"and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's."* It is an amazing statement of the blanket of divine security that always enfolds us – that there is nothing in all creation that can "separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."<sup>6</sup> It is the very heart of the gospel, and we cannot hear it enough: ***"What is our only comfort, in life and in death? That we belong—body and soul, in life and in death—not to ourselves but to our faithful Savior, Jesus Christ..."***

But Paul nestles this precious gospel promise in a somewhat challenging context. He surrounds it, on both sides, with an ethical reminder. If we are always safe in God... if God will forgive our sin and hold onto us no matter what... then the same must be true of other believers... even the ones who disagree with us, push us, or even infuriate us. "Who are you to pass judgment on others?" Paul asks. *"It is before their own lord that they stand or fall."* And, Paul concludes, *"they will be upheld,"* just like you will be, for they belong to God in their lives, and in their deaths, just like you belong to God in your life and your death.

One of the most famous sermons the theologian Paul Tillich ever preached was based on Romans. He set out to explain what Paul meant when he said we are saved and justified by faith, not by deeds or works. In that sermon, Tillich urged Christians to "accept the fact that we are accepted." Our main challenge, he said, was to believe – to really believe – that God loves us and forgives us no matter what we have done or left undone. But in this later chapter Paul suggests that there may be an even greater challenge. If we accept that we, as sinners, are accepted no matter what, then we must also accept that our brothers and sisters – even the ones with whom we disagree -- are accepted, too. And that is not always easy.

To illustrate how this concept can operate in the life of faith, I want to tell you a story. It is a true story, a very old story, and it goes to the very heart of what it means to belong to God in life and in death. It all came to a head in the German city of Augsburg. The year was 1566, and Maximilian II, emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, had a problem. As a Catholic, he had reluctantly accepted the fact that he was probably going to have to live with Lutheranism. He had inherited an uneasy peace between Catholics and Protestants, but just two years into his reign, upstart Calvinists – our predecessors in the faith – started pushing things too far. And no one was a bigger thorn in Maximilian's side than Frederick III, the ruler of the Palatinate of the Rhine. Frederick's Heidelberg Catechism was riling everybody up. He was frustratingly stubborn about his faith. He just wouldn't keep his mouth shut, and he was making things uncomfortable, and Maximilian had had enough of it. He had called Frederick up to Augsburg to give him one last chance to defend himself and promise to behave. If the Emperor wasn't satisfied with what he heard, he planned to depose Frederick and banish him from the empire... or perhaps worse.

There was, however, a real problem with this solution in Maximilian's mind. It was that Frederick, despite all his stubbornness and troublemaking, was an undeniably good and devout man of God. Even though Maximilian disagreed passionately with this subordinate leader over certain tenets of the faith, he could not escape a lingering sense that God was standing with Frederick in the same way that God stood with him -- that Frederick's comfort too, in life and in death, was that he belonged, body and soul, to his Savior, Jesus Christ.

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<sup>6</sup> Romans 8:39

And so, on May 14, 1566, Frederick entered the great hall at Augsburg to face his inquisition. Standing before the Emperor, he was very much aware that his circumstances were perilous. He knew that the theological debates he was fueling were pushing the empire toward civil war, and he knew the Emperor would not hesitate to act swiftly and decisively to avoid that result. Before he had left the Rhineland, Frederick's friends had openly shared their fears that he would not leave Augsburg alive. "There may be danger in store for me at the Diet," he had told them, "but I have a comforting hope and trust in my heavenly father, that he will make me an instrument of his own power... not in word only, but also in deed and truth."<sup>7</sup>

As the council began, it became immediately clear that things were just as bad as Frederick and his friends had feared. His official supporters, few as they were, had all but vanished. Officially charged with heresy, Frederick was told that he must publicly denounce his Reformed, Calvinistic beliefs or be banished forever. The full military power of the empire was on display to remind him that an even more painful fate may also await him if he didn't cooperate. It was in this moment that the confessional words that had been so faithfully written by his pastor and a local professor back in Heidelberg, the two men who had accepted Frederick's invitation to write down, as best they could, the common convictions of their faith: "***What is my only comfort, in life and in death? That I belong—body and soul, in life and in death—not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ...***"

Steadied in his spirit by this eternal promise, Frederick calmly explained to the Emperor and his council why his catechism said what it did. He gently entered into the most contentious theological debates of the day. Through it all, the whole room lay silent. By the time he finished, the Lutherans – some of whom had been, just recently, spreading vicious rumors that Frederick was insane and possessed by the devil – were the ones who spoke up and asked the Emperor to show Frederick mercy. Even Maximilian himself was impressed by the peace and kindness Frederick had shown under dire circumstances. Frederick was acquitted of all charges and allowed to return to his Palatinate. He would carry with him a nickname that would follow him for the rest of his life, one that was given to him by the Emperor himself. He is known today as "Frederick the Pious."

Whether we live or whether we die, Paul says, we belong to the Lord. We are accepted – even when we are stubborn, even when we are contentious, even when we frustrate our brothers and sisters – we are accepted by a God who is committed to love us and walk with us no matter what may come. And the same is true of those brothers and sisters who frustrate us, who believe things that we cannot understand or accept. They, too, are safe in the arms of a God who overcomes everything with a love that is always greater and stronger than any failure or frustration we may dream up.

***"What, my friends, is our only comfort, in life and in death? That we belong—body and soul, in life and in death—not to ourselves but to our faithful Savior, Jesus Christ..."***

Amen.

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<sup>7</sup> Rogers, 106.