WHAT DOES A TEXT WRITTEN BY TWO DEAD WHITE GUYS who lived in Europe over 560 years ago have to say to today’s urban young people?

In 2006, the youth director at my church asked me to take a 16th-century teaching tool of Reformed theology and translate it for a group of 21st-century digital natives, young people from both the church and the community. Some of them had Bible knowledge; others had none. I had my work cut out for me. Could the Heidelberg Catechism speak to the hopes and fears of young people from the hip hop culture?

What was happening at my church in 2006? That year two church members intervened when a young woman was stabbed in our church parking lot and then hid under a car from her client. Does God have an answer for her? Also that year, my next-door neighbor was using violence to intimidate young people who were not members of his gang. Is there a good word for them from the Heidelberg? A young man who attended Bible study at our church wanted to be mentored—but his family life overpowered his intentions to follow Jesus. Do the words of two young cats from faraway Germany in the distant past have anything to encourage him?

I have spent over 20 years of pastoral ministry in an urban context where issues center on the big questions of life. Hell and heaven, judgment and grace, and salvation are constantly on kids’ minds. They wonder if God has any good answers to their hopes and fears. Does God care about their economic life, their relational life, and their spiritual life? Does God care about them at all?

In 1563, King Frederick III asked two young theologians—Zacharias Ursinus and Casper Olevianus—to write a biblically based tool that could be used by preachers and teachers. According to the Preface, the purpose of this catechism was to educate young people in the Word of God so that they could live in accordance with it. Ursinus and Olevianus were called to translate a fledgling faith for their generation.

I was following a trusted path to get sound theology into my young people and speak to their hopes and fears. Most of them proudly wore T-shirts featuring the late rapper, Tupac Shakur, to youth meetings and mission trips. Shakur, who was shot and killed in 1996, has been the prophet for the hip hop soul. Why do young urban people—and some adults—continue to listen to him? In his book *Holler If You Hear Me*, theologian Michael Eric Dyson quotes Shakur in a prison interview: “I’m just trying to speak about things that affect me and about the things that affect our community.” Shakur told the truth about life as it is. I needed a text that was bold and honest enough to do the same. The Heidelberg Catechism—unaired to tell it like it is—was the right document.

The text doesn’t start with bad news. Question and Answer 1 reframes human identity in the context of being embraced and owned by the Father. I translated “What is your only comfort?” to “Who’s your daddy?” to preserve the personal tone the writers stressed throughout the catechism. In a context where many young people have strained relationships with fathers, the introduction speaks to their unconditional acceptance by and connection with their holy Father. “I am the property of Jesus Christ, all of me, body and soul, for all times, in life and death; I am his property because he purchased me with his blood; and then he freed me from the grasp of the devil; I know this because the Holy Spirit assures me that it’s true, and he makes me wholeheartedly ready and willing to live for him.” This version resonated with them.

Question and answer 2 addresses how to acquire this new life in Christ: “How do I get to live this life? I have to understand
how great my sin is; I have to understand the hugeness of what God did to save me; I must be filled with a desire to express my thanks to God for what he done for me.” That was a breath of fresh air, truly good news for my young people to hear. They were eager to learn more about this God who was truly interested in their stories as they found themselves in his story.

The catechism’s three main parts are often called “sin, salvation, and service” (or “guilt, grace, and gratitude”). The “sin” section of the catechism speaks to life as it is lived on the street and in the neighborhood. So question 3, “How do you know your misery?” was recast as “What’s your ghetto report card?” Question 7 was changed from “Then where does this corrupt human nature come from?” to “Naughty by nature.” Question 10, “Will God permit such disobedience and rebellion to go unpunished?” became “Will we pay the cost to be the boss?”

The “salvation” section introduces God’s rescue plan for us in Jesus Christ. The road of deliverance takes us through many stops on the salvation train. In question 13 we ask, “Do I have enough to cover the cost?” Our response can only be, “Not even close; in fact, our guilt increases every minute, every day.” Question 19 is translated as, “How will the revolution be televised?” It can be viewed from God’s whole story of creation, fall, redemption, and new creation.

The last section has to do with our “service” to the Lord. Once we know how great our sin is and our desperate need for a Savior, what can we do to say thanks for all God has done for us? I wanted young people to not reduce God to a set of “oughts” and “shoulds.” I wanted them to see in the commandments an opportunity to be honest about the sin in their lives, to accept God’s salvation in Jesus, and then live out their grateful responses to God’s outpouring of grace.

Question and answer 86 begins the gratitude section powerfully. The question is long, so I recast it as “Giving God his propers (respect) is good?” In other words, God deserves our respect. The answer is, “We did not and cannot do anything to be worthy of the salvation that God offers us through Jesus Christ. But we can show our thanks for this salvation by choosing to live by the Spirit, who is constantly changing us to be more like Jesus so that others can know Jesus through us.”

My young people want people to respect them. So does God. Bible texts that concur with the answer are included for an even more powerful witness: Romans 12:1-2; Romans 6:13; Matthew 5:16; Galatians 5:22-24. These young people understood the need to give the Lord his proper due—in the light and dark places of their hearts and lives. Our conversations were engaging, thoughtful, and profound. The Holy Spirit showed up mightily.

So can the Heidelberg Catechism be useful in any context? Absolutely—if teachers, pastors, and lay leaders are willing to translate the catechism so that it speaks to the hopes and fears of young people in their contexts. I heard the catechism for the first time in 1977. At first glance, I didn’t take to its rich themes. Now I know that it’s a text that’s still relevant to life lived at street level. ■

You’ll find samples of the author’s “translation” of the Heidelberg Catechism in the web version of this article at thebanner.org.