

Church History (31): The Heidelberg Catechism

In this lesson, I intend to give a general survey of the *Heidelberg Catechism*, providing first a short biographical sketch of its primary author, and then end with some brief thoughts about its historical importance.

I. The Heidelberg Catechism

1. *Its primary author.* "Traditionally the writing of the *Heidelberg Catechism* has been ascribed to Caspar Olevianus and Zacharias Ursinus. Yet further research in this century has shown that Ursinus alone should be considered the major contributor. Olevianus had no more input in its production than the other theologians and pastors of Heidelberg (i.e., to check it over)" (Anderson).¹ "To Olevianus was given the responsibility for a final revision and translation into German. But the Catechism itself, was built upon an earlier work of Ursinus called the *Minor Catechism*. Its three-fold division, based on the Epistle to the Romans, was taken over and about ninety of its questions were adopted with some modifications (Miller)."² "In some respects, indeed, the authorship of this symbol must be referred, we know, to different hands. But in its main plan, and reigning spirit, it is the warm product, plainly, of a single mind, and to the end of time, accordingly, it will be known and revered as a monument, sacred to the memory of Zacharias Ursinus" (J.W.N.).³ "It's very plain, that the one mind in which the *Catechism* has thus been molded and cast, is that emphatically of Ursinus and of no one besides. It breathes his spirit, reflects his image, and speaks to us in the very tones of his voice, from the first page to the last" (J.W.N.).⁴

"Zacharias Ursinus (1534-1583) was born into a Protestant family, in what is now modern-day Poland (about 80 miles from the German border). In 1550, when he was sixteen years old, he went to Wittenberg to study at the university there. In God's providence, Philip Melancthon, a professor at the university, took notice of this promising student" (Beeke).⁵ In 1560, Ursinus went to Zurich, where he studied under Peter Martyr Vermigli. "His relations to this learned and excellent man were in some respects of the same kind, with those in which he had stood previously with Melancton. So far as the Reformed complexion is found to prevail directly in Ursinus, the pupil of Melancthon, the modification is to be referred mainly to Peter Martyr" (J.W.N.).⁶ In 1559, Frederick III (also called Frederick the Wise), became elector of one of the seven German states. At the time, Germany was mostly Lutheran. "Frederick, one of the most sincere and godly Protestant rulers of the 16th century, made an intense study of the issues dividing Lutherans from Reformed, and was inclined to the Reformed side of the argument" (Needham).⁷ "When Frederick requested Peter Martyr to become the principal of the College of Wisdom in Heidelberg, he declined. He said he was too old (sixty), but he knew a young man who would be perfect for the job. That young man was Zacharias Ursinus" (Beeke).⁸ Frederick also invited Caspar Olevianus (1536-1587) to teach at the university and pastor one of the local churches. It was here in Heidelberg (Germany), that Ursinus and Olevianus developed a close friendship that lasted the rest of their lives. After Frederick died in 1576, his oldest son, Louis, succeeded him. "Being Lutheran, he was not in agreement with his father, and he absolutely would not tolerate

¹ R. Dean Anderson, *The Heidelberg Catechism: A Study Guide*, ix

² Allen Miller, *The Heidelberg Catechism*, 6

³ J.W.N., *The Commentary of Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism*, vii

⁴ J.W.N., *The Commentary of Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism*, xiii

⁵ Joel Beeke, *Reformation Heroes*, 107

⁶ J.W.N., *The Commentary of Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism*, x

⁷ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 3:337

⁸ Joel Beeke, *Reformation Heroes*, 109

the 'heresy' of Calvinism. Louis forced both Olevianus and Ursinus to leave Heidelberg" (Beeke).⁹ Both men were forced to leave Heidelberg, and eventually took up teaching positions within other German cities. "Olevianus eventually accepted a call in 1584 as pastor and teacher in the new academy at Herborn, and Ursinus accepted a teaching position at Neustadt-on-Hardt, where he lectured faithfully for a few years before passing on to glory in 1582" (Beeke).¹⁰

The *Heidelberg Catechism* was written in January, 1563. Ursinus had come to Heidelberg two years before in 1561. "It soon became plain, that he was formed to be the ruling spirit of the new movement, which had commenced in the Church of the Palatinate (the German state over which Frederick governed). He gained completely the confidence of Frederick, his learning and piety, and excellent judgment, secured for him the general respect of his colleagues, and from all sides, the eyes of men turned to him more and more, as the best representative and expounded of the cause in whose service he stood, and to whose defense he has cheerfully consecrated his life" (J.W.N.).¹¹ Frederick appointed him the task of writing the *Catechism* in 1562. "According to the provisions of the Peace of Augsburg (1555), the Roman Catholic and Lutheran faiths were recognized, but 'Zwinglian' or 'Calvinist' views had no legal standing" (Miller).¹² Thus, while Frederick formally adopted and promoted the *Catechism* in 1563, it was not formally and legally accepted until the Imperial Diet at Augsburg in the spring of 1566. "Here, with the pomp that befitted the occasion, the Emperor read a decree charging Frederick with having introduced changes in the government and worship of the churches and a catechism dissenting from the Augsburg Confession" (Miller).¹³

Following a brief recess, Frederick reappeared accompanied by his son, John, as his 'spiritual armor-bearer,' who carried the Bible and the Augsburg Confession. After a courageous defense reminiscent of Martin Luther's appearance before the Diet at Worms, Frederick, having won the admiration of the majority present, was judged as remaining within the teachings of the Augsburg Confession and to be a prince in good standing in the Empire. Thereafter the *Heidelberg Catechism* was more widely received and accepted by churches in other states and nations, and the praise accorded it probably exceeds that of any other statement of faith.¹⁴

2. *Its structure and content.* The *Catechism* has 129 questions divided into three parts. Part I: Man's Sin and Guilt; Part II: Man's Redemption and Freedom; Part III: Man's Gratitude and Obedience. "The structure of the *Catechism* can be summarized by the words, 'Guilt, Grace, and Gratitude.' It exposes our sinfulness, points us to the rich grace of God in Jesus Christ, and teaches us both the motive and method of showing our thankfulness to our Lord" (Renihan).¹⁵ "The catechism of which we shall speak in these lectures consists of three parts. The first treats of the misery of man, the second of his deliverance from this misery, and the third of gratitude."¹⁶ "In the third edition the *Catechism* was arranged under 52 divisions to correspond to the number of weeks in the year. And from that time to this, in many Reformed churches, pastors make use of this *Catechism* to unfold the biblical system of doctrine" (Williamson).¹⁷

⁹ Joel Beeke, *Reformation Heroes*, 113

¹⁰ Joel Beeke, *Reformation Heroes*, 113

¹¹ J.W.N., *The Commentary of Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism*, xii

¹² Allen Miller, *The Heidelberg Catechism*, 6

¹³ Allen Miller, *The Heidelberg Catechism*, 6

¹⁴ Allen Miller, *The Heidelberg Catechism*, 6-7

¹⁵ James Renihan, *An Orthodox Catechism*, 7

¹⁶ Zacharias Ursinus, *The Commentary of Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism*, 14

¹⁷ G.I. Williamson, *The Heidelberg Catechism*, 1

The Decalogue belongs to the first part, in as far as it is the mirror through which we are brought to see ourselves, and thus led to a knowledge of our sins and misery, and to the third part in as far as it is the rule of true thankfulness and of a Christian life. The Apostles' Creed is embraced in the second part inasmuch as it unfolds the way of deliverance from sins. The sacraments, belonging to the doctrine of faith and being the seals that are attached thereto, belong in like manner to this second part of the catechism, which treats of deliverance from the misery of man. And prayer, being the chief part of spiritual worship and of thankfulness, may, with great propriety, be referred to the third general part.¹⁸

(1) Man's sin and guilt (Questions 1-11). The *Catechism* begins with an introductory question that underscore its pastoral and personal nature. "Q.1. What is your 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, who at the cost of His own blood has fully paid for all my sins and has completely freed me from the dominion of the devil; that He protects me so well that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, that everything must fit His purpose for my salvation. Therefore, by His Holy Spirit, He also assures me of eternal life, and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for Him." Ursinus himself said of question 1 in his *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*: "The question of comfort is placed, and treated first, because it embodies the design and substance of the catechism. The design is, that we may be led to the attainment of sure and solid comfort, both in life and death."¹⁹ It's within the answer to the second question, the structure of the *Catechism* is provided. "Q.2. How many things must you know that you may live and die in the blessedness of this comfort? Three. First the greatness of my sin and wretchedness. Second, how I am freed from all my sins and their wretched consequences. Third, what gratitude I owe to God for such redemption." We have to know our sin, God's grace, and the way to express our gratitude. "The three things mentioned are discussed thus: from questions 1-11 the misery of man is discussed, from questions 12-85 our deliverance is discussed, and from questions 86-129 our gratitude is discussed. To have true comfort, all three of these must be known from the heart" (Kersten).²⁰ Ursinus said about question 2: "This question contains the statement and division of the whole catechism and at the same time accords with the division of the Scriptures into the Law and the Gospel."²¹

Questions 3-11, deal with the knowledge (3-5) and nature of our guilt (6-11). The knowledge of our guilt comes through the law: "Q.3. Where do you learn of your sin and its wretched consequences? From the Law of God. Q.4. What does the Law of God require? Jesus Christ teaches this in a summary in Matthew 22:37-40. Q.5. Can you keep all this perfectly? No, for by nature I am prone to hate God and my neighbor." The nature of our guilt and corruption is derived from our first parents: "Q.7. Where, then, does this corruption of human nature come from? From the fall and disobedience of our first parents, Adam and Eve, in the Garden of Eden; whereby our human life is so poisoned that we are all conceived and born in the state of sin. Q.8. But are we so perverted that we are altogether unable to do good and prone to do evil? Yes, unless we are born again through the Spirit of God. Q.9. Is not God unjust in requiring of man in His Law what he cannot do? No, for God so created man that he could do it. But man, upon the instigation of the devil, by deliberate disobedience, has cheated himself and all his descendants out of these gifts." The *Catechism* ends its first part by describing the justice of God in condemning sinful man. "Q.10. Will God let man get by with such disobedience and defection? Certainly not, for the wrath of God is revealed from heaven, both against our inborn sinfulness and our

¹⁸ Zacharias Ursinus, *The Commentary of Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism*, 14

¹⁹ Zacharias Ursinus, *The Commentary of Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism*, 17

²⁰ G.H. Kersten, *The Heidelberg Catechism*, 1:21-22

²¹ Zacharias Ursinus, *The Commentary of Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism*, 20

actual sins, and He will punish them according to His righteous judgment in time and in eternity, as He has declared: 'Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the Law, and do them.'"

The *Catechism* in its first part is intended to awaken a consciousness of the misery of sin with its guilt and punishment, and of the necessity of redemption from sin, and thereby to awaken in man a longing for deliverance. For this purpose, it appeals to God's word, and to experience. But the reason of the natural man, which does not so readily submit to a conviction of sin, offers various objections. These the *Catechism* considers, in order to refute them. They are as follows: 1) Whether God Himself is not the cause of sin, Q.6; 2) whether there is not some capability for the good in man, Q.7; 3) whether God in His demands does not do man injustice, Q.9; 4) whether God's mercy is not in contradiction to punishment, Q.11.²²

(2) Man's redemption and freedom (Questions 12-85). The second part of the *Catechism*, begins with the satisfaction of Christ's sacrifice as Mediator, explains the Apostle's Creed, and then discusses the sacraments and church discipline. "Having shown in the first part of the *Catechism*, that all men are in a state of eternal condemnation, on account of not having rendered the obedience which the law of God requires, we are next led to inquire whether there is, or may be, any way of escape or deliverance from this state of misery and death. To this question the catechism answers, that deliverance may be granted, if satisfaction be made to the law and justice of God, by a punishment sufficient for the sin that has been committed. The law binds all, either to obedience, or if this is not rendered, to punishment; and the performance or payment of either is perfect righteousness, which God approves of in whomsoever it is found."²³

(a) Christ the Mediator. "Q.12. Since, then, by the righteous judgment of God we have deserved temporal and eternal punishment, how may we escape this punishment, come again to grace, and be reconciled to God? God wills that His righteousness be satisfied; therefore, payment in full must be made to His righteousness, either by ourselves or by another. Q.13. Can we make this payment ourselves? By no means. On the contrary, we increase our debt each day." The *Catechism* then describes why it's necessary for a mediator to be both God and man. "Q.16. Why must He be a true and righteous man? Because God's righteousness requires that man who has sinned should make reparation for sin, but the man who is himself a sinner cannot pay for others. Q.17. Why must He at the same time be true God? So that by the power of His divinity He might bear as a man the burden of God's wrath, and recover for us and restore to us righteousness and life."

(b) The Apostle's Creed. "The Heidelberg *Catechism* is really two creeds in one. Or, there is a creed within this creed. A large part of this catechism (or creed) is simply a careful explanation of the Apostles' Creed" (Williamson).²⁴ "Q.22. What, then must a Christian believe? All that is promised us in the gospel, a summary of which is taught us in the articles of the Apostles' Creed, our universally acknowledged confession of faith." After expounding every phrase of the Apostles' Creed, the *Catechism* ends with a short treatment of justification by faith alone. "Q.61. Why do you say that you are righteous by faith alone? Not because I please God by virtue of the worthiness of my faith, but because the satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ alone are my righteousness before God, and because I can accept it and make it mine in no other way than by faith alone."

²² Otto Thelemann, *An Aid to the Heidelberg Catechism*, 47-48

²³ Zacharias Ursinus, *The Commentary of Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism*, 77

²⁴ G.I. Williamson, *The Heidelberg Catechism: A Study Guide*, 3

(c) The Sacraments. Having spoken of the grace of faith in questions 59-64, the *Catechism* then expounds the nature of the sacraments in questions 65-80. "Q.65. Since, then, faith alone makes us share in Christ and all His benefits, where does such faith originate? The Holy Spirit creates it in our hearts by the preaching of the holy gospel, and confirms it by the use of the holy sacraments." "This Question points out the connection which holds between the doctrine of faith and the sacraments. The Holy Ghost ordinarily produces faith in us by the ecclesiastical ministry, which consists of two parts, the word and the sacraments. The Holy Ghost works faith in our hearts by the preaching of the gospel, and cherishes, confirms, and seals it by the use of the sacraments."²⁵

(d) Church discipline. The Catechism addresses church discipline in relation to the Supper. "Q.81. Who ought to come to the table of the Lord? Those who are displeased with themselves for their sins, and who nevertheless trust that these sins have been forgiven them and that their remaining weakness is covered by the passion and death of Christ, and who also desire more and more to strengthen their faith and improve their life. The impenitent and hypocrites, however, eat and drink judgment to themselves."

(3) Man's gratitude and obedience (Questions 86-129). "The Catechism now discusses the doctrine of thankfulness to which it devotes questions 86-129" (Kersten).²⁶ "Having now considered the misery of man, and his deliverance through Christ, the doctrine of gratitude or thankfulness is necessary. Thankfulness in general is a virtue acknowledging and professing the person from whom we have received benefits, as well as the greatness of the benefits themselves, with a desire to perform towards our benefactor such reciprocal duties as are becoming and possible. It includes truth and justice. *Truth*, because it acknowledges and makes mention of the benefits received and *justice*, because it desires to return thanks equal to that which has been received."²⁷

True Christian thankfulness, therefore, which is here taught, is an acknowledgment and profession of our gracious deliverance, through Christ, from sin and death, and a sincere desire to avoid sin, and everything that might offend God, and to conform the life according to His will, to desire, expect, and receive all good things from God alone, by a true faith, and to render thanks for the benefits received. There are, therefore, four principal Common Places which belong to this general division of thankfulness, Man's conversion—good works—the Law of God, and prayer.²⁸

(a) Conversion and good works. Questions 86-91, address the nature of repentance, conversion, and the need and nature of good works. "Q.88. How many parts are there to the true repentance or conversion of man? Two: the dying of the old self and the birth of the new. Q.89. What is the dying of the old self? Sincere sorrow over our sins and more and more to hate them and to flee from them. Q.90. What is the birth of the new self? Complete joy in God through Christ and a strong desire to live according to the will of God in all good works. Q.91. But what are good works? Only those which are done out of true faith, in accordance with the Law of God, and for His glory, and not those based on our own opinion or on the traditions of men."

(b) The Ten Commandments. "One of the impressive things in the Heidelberg Catechism is the fact that the Ten Commandments are dealt with in the third section. The reason being, the author of the Catechism was aware of a great danger—the danger of thinking that we need the law of God before we are justified to show us our need of the Savior, but that we don't need it afterwards. The Catechism, by

²⁵ Zacharias Ursinus, *The Commentary of Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism*, 340

²⁶ G.H. Kersten, *The Heidelberg Catechism*, 2:82

²⁷ Zacharias Ursinus, *The Commentary of Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism*, 464

²⁸ Zacharias Ursinus, *The Commentary of Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism*, 464

expounding the law at this point, warns against the dangerous error of lawlessness" (Williamson).²⁹ "Q.115. Why, then, does God have the ten commandments preached so strictly since no one can keep them in this life? First, that all our life long we may become increasingly aware of our sinfulness, and therefore more eagerly seek forgiveness of sins and righteousness in Christ. Second, that we may constantly and diligently pray to God for the grace of the Holy Spirit, so that more and more we may be renewed in the image of God, until we attain the goal of full perfection after this life."

(c) Prayer and the Lord's Prayer. The *Catechism* ends with a short description of prayer in general, and then an exposition of the Lord's Prayer. "Q.116. Why is prayer necessary for Christians? Because it is the chief part of the gratitude which God requires of us, and because God will give His grace and Holy Spirit only to those who sincerely beseech Him in prayer without ceasing, and who thank Him for these gifts." "What is prayer? Prayer consists in calling upon the true God, and arises from an acknowledgment and sense of our want, and from a desire of sharing in the divine bounty, in true conversion of heart and confidence in the promise of grace for the sake of Christ the mediator, asking at the hands of God such temporal and spiritual blessings as are necessary for us, or in giving thanks to God for the benefits received."³⁰

3. *Its historical importance.* "The Dutch Reformed Church officially incorporated the Heidelberg Catechism into its confessions of faith at the Synod of Dort in 1618-1619, an international Reformed council that met to counter the rise of Arminianism in the Dutch Republic. This meant that together with the Belgic Confession and the Canons of Dort, Heidelberg constituted one of the 'Three Forms of Unity' in the Dutch Reformed tradition" (Needham).³¹ "It was like a thunderclap from heaven when the *Heidelberg Catechism* appeared in January, 1563. Translated into all European languages, it was distributed in all countries. Rome trembled upon its foundations; the Lutherans were furious. All those who reviled the pure doctrine worked together to make the hated *Catechism* disappear" (Kersten).³² "Marked by a moderate but lucid expression of Reformed theology and a warm evangelical spirit, the Heidelberg Catechism became arguably the most important of all Reformed confessions, gaining acceptance across the entire Reformed world, especially in Germany and the Dutch Republic" (Needham).³³

Apart from the Bible there is no book whose history has been so checkered and yet so influential as that of the Heidelberg Catechism. Having been prepared under the direction and with the assistance of the foremost prince of the time of the Reformation, it attained the distinction of a general symbol for the whole Reformed Church. From its very beginning it encountered opposition. It was seized by bailiffs and suppressed. It was burnt. Even in its home it was supplanted through political federation and Church union. But against all this it stood as invincible as the confessors and martyrs of our Church, with whom it is justly compared. And it is continuing to maintain itself firm and invincible, its power undiminished and its glory undimmed, our fathers' shield and our defense. Its power is the power of the Word of God, for it is born of the Word. Its glory is derived from the light of the Spirit of God, which permeates it. Often stricken, but not destroyed; reviled, and yet esteemed. So may it hold on and continue in its way.³⁴

²⁹ G.I. Williamson, *The Heidelberg Catechism: A Study Guide*, 149

³⁰ Zacharias Ursinus, *The Commentary of Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism*, 619

³¹ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 3:337-338, n.8

³² G.H. Kersten, *The Heidelberg Catechism*, 1:15

³³ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 3:337

³⁴ Otto Thelemann, *An Aid to the Heidelberg Catechism*, 447