

HEIDELBERG CATECHISM
REVISED ACCORDING TO THE ORIGINALS
EDITION 1979

PREFACE

This edition of the Heidelberg Catechism is issued in response to many requests for a parallel German-English Catechism.

Careful comparative studies of the original and the modern German versions, as also the Latin, the Dutch, and the English translations, were made, and, realizing that words and sentence construction become hallowed by use, alterations were made only with great caution after much deliberation to improve diction where permissible, or to state the intent of the original more accurately. The Tercentenary version of 1863 is followed closely.

The Bible passages added as proof texts are numbered for ready reference and are those used in the original editions of 1563. Passages marked with an asterisk (*) were selected as addenda.

We call to remembrance what Frederick III of the Palatinate affirmed before the Emperor Maximilian II well-nigh four hundred years ago (1566): "As to my Catechism, I shall stand by the same. It is also so thoroughly fortified with Scripture passages that it can not be overthrown, and I am confident, with the help of God, shall remain unassailable."

In accord with this testimony it is our sincere prayer that also this edition may turn the attention of readers and students with renewed interest to the immeasurable blessings of that "ONLY COMFORT IN LIFE AND IN DEATH."

- Reformed Church in the United States.

THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM

Our Heidelberg Catechism is the finest fruitage of the Reformation, tried and proven in the furnace of affliction.

Holding forth the Gospel of salvation in Christ Jesus as our only comfort in life and in death, it presents, very personally and divinely eloquent, what is necessary to know that we may live and die happily in that only comfort, the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

In three main divisions, as in the Epistle to the Romans, we are taught first, how great our sin and misery is: second, how we are redeemed from all our sins and misery; third, how we are to be thankful to God for such redemption.

The voice of the good Shepherd is heard throughout, teaching and comforting His own, and they hear His voice and follow Him, and He gives unto them eternal life, and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of His hand.

Elector Prince Frederick III of the Palatinate had called men of Reformed principles to the professorship at the university of Heidelberg, entrusting them with the preparation of a clear, concise and popular statement of the doctrines of salvation in catechetical form, a booklet that could be used by young and old alike, in the home, in the church and in the school. The responsible authorship was placed upon two young professors, Casper Olevianus and Zacharius Ursinus.

Numerous catechisms were already in use, in fact, too many; their very number caused endless confusion, and none received any general and whole-hearted approval. It became apparent therefore, that a catechism was needed that would meet every requirement, a catechism so comprehensive, in which all the cardinal doctrines would be clearly stated, and yet so simple that the common folk and even children could grasp the truths of salvation.

Frederick III, a man of culture and an ardent student of the Bible, was determined to have such a catechism. Being a man of grace and faith and prayer, strong in the Lord, as were also his co-laborers,

the work progressed unto full fruitage. The finished manuscript, presented toward the close of the year 1562, received the hearty approval of the entire faculty and also of the pastors and teachers. Submitted to the Synod, which met at Heidelberg at this time, it was received with applause, and a resolution was passed January 19, 1563, to have it published immediately by government authority. The first edition (German) came off the press early in 1563. A Latin edition followed the same year and also a second German edition, besides an edition with the church liturgy.

The spread and influence of this little book within the bounds of the Palatinate and beyond, in fact in all the world, was phenomenal, exceeding all expectations. Though it was welcomed by the Reformed everywhere, it was destined to meet the fierce hostility of the Roman Catholic Church and the disapproval and unwarranted fury of the Lutherans. Lifting up the Calvinistic standard in the land of Luther was considered treason and injury to his name and memory.

It was made mandatory in all the schools and churches of the Palatinate to teach the Heidelberg catechism, and to read it from the pulpit every Sunday according to its divisions of fifty-two Sundays.

Catechetical preaching and exposition was made a fixed institution for Sunday afternoon service. The liturgy for the Reformed Church of the Palatinate, issued 1563, contained not only the order of worship and church regulations, but also the Heidelberg catechism as the authoritative expression of the doctrine that is to be taught and preached. All education, whether in the home, in the schools, or at the university was based upon it, and the theological training of students for the ministry centered around it. Ursinus, at the "College of Wisdom", immediately started his lectures on its contents. These lectures were published by David Pareus, of which an English edition appeared as early as 1587.

Besides the original two German and the Latin editions, also a translation into the Holland (Dutch) and another into Saxon-German appeared within a year. The English Turner edition, used in the Anglican Church, appeared in 1567, a Hungarian translation in 1567, French in 1570, Scotch in 1571, Hebrew in 1580 and Greek in 1597. During the early years of the following century the catechism was translated into Polish, Lithuanian, Italian, Bohemian and Romanian. The Dutch East India and West India Companies were zealous missionaries for the Heidelberg Catechism. Circling the globe with it, they prepared a Malay translation in 1623, a Javanese in 1623, a Spanish in 1628, a Portuguese in 1665, a Singalese in 1726 and a Tamil in 1754. In the nineteenth century the Dutch Reformed Church prepared translations in Amhari, Sangiri, Arabic, Persian, Chinese, and Japanese.

The Heidelberg Catechism was accepted by the Anglican Church, England, in 1567, as the standard expression of her faith, by the Dutch Synod of Wesel in 1568, by the Synod of Dort in 1571, by the Scottish Church in 1571, and by the great ecumenical Synod of Dort in 1618-19. The British delegates at the Synod of Dort agreed that neither in their own nor in the French Church was there a catechism so suitable and excellent. They reported: "Our Reformed brethren on the continent have a little book whose single leaves are not to be bought with tons of gold."

In 1859 the General Synod of the Reformed Church in the U.S. appointed a committee for "the preparation of a critical standard edition of the Heidelberg Catechism in the original German, and Latin, together with a revised English translation, and an historical introduction, to be published in superior style as a centennial edition in 1863." This very fine, comprehensive edition appeared in 1863, giving an excellent historical and theological review of the catechism and the text in parallel columns in the original German, the Latin, modern German and an English translation conforming closely to the original German. This is known as the Tercentenary Edition.

The English versions in use up to this time, the Anglican 1567, Parry 1591, Laidle 1764, were translations from the Latin and the Dutch, and their sentence construction often deviated from the original German.

The committee, preparing the Tercentenary Edition, was governed by three leading principles. First, "To translate only from the German edition of 1563, as being the ultimate standard of judgment, and refer to translations and all subsequent German editions, not as possessing coordinate authority, but as subordinate aids to the correct understanding of the original. Secondly, to make a faithful translation,

to express the true sense of the German correctly in the idioms of the English language, without weakening or strengthening a single phase of thought. Thirdly, to employ Anglo-Saxon words, avoiding, as far as practicable, the use of Latin and Greek derivatives."

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The authors of the Tercentenary edition give us an eloquent resume of the contents.

"The fundamental concept, the key-note, the grand solemn chord from which is built up and proceeds the great salvation oratorio, is the first question and answer, 'What is thy only comfort in life and in death? That I, with body and soul, both in life and in death, am not my own, but belong to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ'.

"The tone throughout is not didactic, as in many other catechisms, but confessional. The Heidelberg moves in the bosom of the new life of grace in Christ Jesus, for 'God hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son, in whom we have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins.' The teaching is from faith to faith: 'Ye are washed, ye are sanctified, ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God. For we are all the children of God by faith which is in Christ Jesus, for as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ'.

"The Heidelberg is at once a Creed, a Catechism, a Confession, and a very Liturgy. Imbued with the full spirit of worship and devotion, it is both simple and profound, a fit manual of instruction for the young, and yet a whole system of divinity for the older. Its utterances rise at times to a height of heavenly pathos and breathe forth lyrical strains of devotion. The language and style are ineffably beautiful, at times even grand and sublime, full of religious eloquence. It speaks the language of faith, of life, of devotion, of authority, of priestly solemnity and unction. As the Bible, its thoughts clothe themselves with a sort of necessary eloquence in all languages.

"The body of its content is the Creed, which enters into the whole constitution of the Catechism, wherefore its tone throughout is confessional, and its cardinal doctrine is justification by faith through imputation of Christ's satisfaction, righteousness and holiness. All is grace which is in Christ Jesus, based upon God's covenant of grace, of which baptism is the holy pledge, sign and seal. Rooted in this covenant of grace, baptism and Christian education and Church have their rightful, divinely appointed sphere.

"The Heidelberg Catechism, being the spontaneous utterance of the Reformed faith, is the old Classical Symbol of the Reformed Church in all lands."

HISTORICAL SETTING

Our Catechism received its name HEIDELBERG from the ancient capital city Heidelberg of the lower Palatinate (Unterpfalz) and its noted university. The founding of this seat of learning dates back to the year 1385.

The Reformation of the sixteenth century did not immediately find favor in the Palatinate, although Luther had been heard in Heidelberg as early as 1518. His message, however, left a powerful impression on the minds of young theologians, whose names became conspicuous afterwards in the Protestant movement. The university was bound to the Church of Rome and therefore it was impossible for any, belonging to it, to take any other position than that of hostility to the Reformation. The government also remained apathetic, fearing turmoil and changes. Nevertheless, the impact of church reformation found its mark. The people themselves took the matter into their own hands at a fitting occasion, when mass was about to be celebrated at the principle church of Heidelberg, by singing "Es ist das Heil uns kommen her" (To us salvation now is come). This occurred on Sunday, Dec. 20, 1545. But the struggle for church reformation lasted another ten years, when finally the Peace of Augsburg (1555) established religious freedom, and "Sapienz College", the "College of

Wisdom," an institution for the education of ministers, was opened in the Augustinian convent at Heidelberg.

The following decade, however, proved most critical for the reform movement. The followers of Luther were already divided among themselves: the ultra-Lutherans maintained the bodily presence of the Lord in the sacrament, while the Melancthonians held to a spiritual presence, as taught also by Calvin. The Augustana Variata, prepared by Melancthon and in which the idea of the material and bodily presence of the Lord in the sacrament was modified, now was furiously attacked by those who strove to retain the Augustana Invariata (unchanged).

The Palatinate, and especially Heidelberg, became the very battleground for these and other factions. Lutheranism finally became fixed in the Formula of Concord, while the several Calvinistic confessions, which appeared in the midst of this controversy, were embodied in the Heidelberg Catechism as the expression of the Reformed faith.

In 1559 the electoral power of the Palatinate passed into the hands of Frederick the Third, who subsequently merited the reputation of being the Father of the Heidelberg Catechism. He determined to carry out the reformation among his people in a way suited to his own convictions of truth and right without any further regard for impractical schemes of compromise and union; which meant that in the Palatinate religion should be ordered and established, both in regard to doctrine and worship, after the Reformed standard, and not after the Lutheran views. Church should not mean Lutheranism, proclaiming the name of Luther; she is to proclaim Christ and hold forth the Word of Truth and Life. It was made mandatory that only the words of the institution of the Lord's Supper were to be used in the celebration of the Lord's Supper. All crosses, candles, altars, and pictures were removed from the churches, and the singing of the Psalms in the German language was introduced. Dissatisfied and contentious teachers and ministers were disqualified and dismissed. Teachers and ministers with Calvinistic and Melancthonian principles were called to fill the pulpit and the lecturn. It was by this reform that the able young men, Kaspar Olevianus and Zacharias Ursinus, the renowned authors of our Catechism, came to Heidelberg.

Kaspar Olevianus, born on August 10, 1532, in the city of Treves on the French border, applied himself diligently to the study of the general knowledge and sciences of his day. After attending various noteworthy schools, he studied jurisprudence at the university of Bourges. One of his schoolmates was a son of Count Frederick of Simern (later Frederick III of the Palatinate). This promising young man, together with two other students, drowned when their boat turned over while they attempted to cross a river. Olevianus witnessed this tragedy and tried to rescue his friend, almost losing his own life in the attempt. Then and there he vowed to dedicate his life to the Gospel of God. He finished his studies in jurisprudence and returned to his home with the degree of doctor of civil law. His great desire now was to prepare himself by proper studies for the ministry of the Gospel, and so he went to Geneva, Switzerland, and attended the lectures of the renowned theologian and teacher, John Calvin. At Zurich he made the acquaintance of Peter Martyr and at Lausanne, Theodore Beza. At Geneva the zealous Reformer, William Farel, prevailed upon him to return to his home to preach. In 1559, at the age of twenty-seven, he returned to Treves, where he took charge of a school and also began preaching with fearless fervor. Treves was thrown into commotion. Olevianus and other reform leaders were cast into prison and after ten months of negotiations, were set free under condition of heavy fines and banishment from the city. The temper of the men of God is forged in the furnace of tribulation, and the Lord always has a greater task ready for those who are thus tempered.

Frederick III of the Palatinate, recalling that this same Olevianus, as a young student, had risked his life to save his son, and realizing that he was now being persecuted and banished for the sake of the Gospel, called him into the service of the Gospel at Heidelberg.

In 1560 he became lecturer at the University, and the following year professor of dogmatics. Within a year, however, he exchanged his position for the pastorate of a city church. Although there were many very able and older men at Heidelberg, Olevianus, still very young but tried in the furnace of

affliction, was eminently a preacher of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Clad in the full armour of God, he proclaimed: "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter. Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus, Our Lord."

Zacharias Ursinus, born at Breslau, Silisia, on July 18, 1534, entered the university of Wittenberg, Germany at the age of sixteen. He remained there for seven years and it was during this time that he became strongly attached to his eminent teacher, Philip Melancthon, with whom he attended the conference at Worms in the year 1557. After this he made personal contacts with the leaders of the reformation at Heidelberg and Strassburg in Germany, at Basel, Lausanne and Geneva in Switzerland and at Orlean and Paris in France. In 1558 he became the rector of the Elisabethan Gymnasium at Breslau, his native city. The views of the sacraments, whether the Lord was materially or spiritually present in the elements, were being discussed in church circles. It was apparent from the beginning that Ursinus held to the views of Melancthon, and for this reason the fury of the ultra-Lutherans rose against him and he was branded as an anti-Lutheran Calvinist. He ably defended and vindicated his teaching on the sacraments and on the person of Christ in a tract which he published at that time. This, however, did not bridge the differences as Ursinus had hoped; instead, it increased the antagonism, and early in 1560 he resigned his position. "I will go," he said, "to the Zurichers, whose reputation indeed is not great here, but who have so famous a name among other churches that it cannot be obscured by our preachers. They are God-fearing, thoroughly learned men with whom I have resolved to spend my life. God will provide for the rest."

He went to Zurich and here he again greets his old friends Bullinger and Peter Martyr. It so happened that Frederick III at this time had requested the help of Peter Martyr to continue the reformation in the Palatinate. Martyr considered himself too old for such a difficult task and recommended his capable young friend Zacharias Ursinus, who, in the year 1561, was called to the professorship of theology at the University of Heidelberg and also to the rectorship of Sapienz College.

For many years Ursinus lectured at these institutions of learning. He was very exacting in his studies and lectures, always clear and concise. For this reason he was eminently fitted for the teaching profession and also for the great task of preparing a catechism so comprehensive as to include all the principal doctrines and yet so simple, clear and practical, that young and old, students and theologians would cherish and love the "only comfort in life and in death."

Under the supervision of Frederick III the preliminary work was done by the faculty of the University, but the final form of the catechism and its edition was entrusted to Olevianus and Ursinus. The finished manuscript was ready by the end of 1562 and was unanimously approved. The first edition came off the press early in 1563.

The appearance of this Catechism immediately aroused not only the Roman Catholic Church but also the Lutherans and even Emperor Maximilian II. At the Diet of Augsburg in 1566 Frederick III, Elector of the Palatinate, was charged with innovations and the use of a catechism not agreeing with the Augsburg Confession. By decree it was demanded of him that he change or disown the catechism, and if he refused to do so he would be excluded from the peace of the Empire, and that he would have to suffer the consequences both in respect to himself and his province. The Elector then withdrew from the Diet for a moment. He returned soon with his son Casimir who carried a Bible, and began modestly but firmly to make his defense, appealing to the Emperor's sense of justice and right, that "in matters of faith and conscience he could acknowledge but one Master, the Lord of lords and King of kings. As for his Catechism, it was all in accord with the Bible, so well fortified with marginal proof texts, that it cannot be overthrown. What he had publicly declared before, he now solemnly professed again, that if anyone of whatever order or condition could show him any thing better from the

Scriptures, he would take it as the highest favor, and willingly yield himself to God's truth. The Bible is here for this purpose. If his Majesty, or any of those present, were pleased to do him the service, he should have his most hearty thanks. Till this were done, he trusted in his Majesty's gracious forbearance. Should this expectation, however, be disappointed, he would still comfort himself by the sure promise of his Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, made to him as well as to all believers, that what he might lose for his Name in this life, should be restored to him a hundredfold in the next."

This manly address in the defense of the faith gained for him a signal victory over the Diet. Disagreeing with the judgment of the Emperor, the Diet voted that the Elector of the Palatinate was to be regarded and treated as belonging to the Alliance of Augsburg and within the jurisdiction of the Peace of the Empire.

The Heidelberg Catechism thus gained general recognition, and while Prince Frederick III was governor of the Palatinate the catechism was the medium for instructing his people in the Only Comfort. The Elector was called to his reward on October 26, 1576 at the age of sixty-one years. On his death-bed he confessed to those present: "I have lived here long enough for you and for the Church; I am called now to a better life. I have done for the Church what I could, but my power has been small. He who is almighty and who has cared for his Church before I was born, lives and reigns in heaven. He will not forsake us, neither will He allow the prayers and tears, which I so often shed upon my knees in this chamber for my successors and the Church, to go unanswered and without effect."

God endued this princely man with wisdom and courage as well as unpretentious humility, and when it came to defend the cause of the Gospel of God, his province and his very life before the Diet of Augsburg, 1566, he stood ready to declare the whole counsel of God concerning our salvation set forth in his catechism of the Christian Faith.

Unique in its classic perfection, its language is that of the Spirit of Truth testifying that we are the children of God through Jesus Christ our Lord, praying with childlike reverence:

OUR FATHER WHICH ART IN HEAVEN, HALLOWED BE THY NAME. THY KINGDOM COME. THY WILL BE DONE IN EARTH, AS IT IS IN HEAVEN. GIVE US THIS DAY OUR DAILY BREAD. AND FORGIVE US OUR DEBTS, AS WE FORGIVE OUR DEBTORS. AND LEAD US NOT INTO TEMPTATION, BUT DELIVER US FROM EVIL: FOR THINE IS THE KINGDOM, AND THE POWER, AND THE GLORY, FOR EVER. AMEN.