

Heidelberg Catechism Introduction

Primary Sources:

- Commentary of Ursinus upon the Heidelberg Catechism: seeking4truth.com
- Heidelberg-catechism.com

Background

Heidelberg was the capital of the Palatinate area of what is today Germany (Pfalz in German)

- It was governed by the Elector
- Luther visited in 1518, presented the “Heidelberg Theses”, which focused on the cross of Christ as the only means of salvation
- In 1520’s, reformed minded ministers teach the gospel and called for reform
- A series of reform-minded electors supported the reformation
- A growing focus on education saw children being taught reading, writing....and catechism!

Controversy over the Lord’s Supper

- Within the University, 2 views of the Lord’s Supper were being promoted:
 - Lutheran view: Prof. Tilemann Heshusius (professor and minister at Heiliggeistkirche in Heidelberg)
 - Christ was physically present in the Lord’s Supper
 - Reformed view: Wilhelm Klebitz: Student in Heidelberg and a Deacon
 - Believers have a real, spiritual communion with Christ, who is present spiritually but not physically
- Frederick III, who had developed Reformed views sent both away to establish peace
- These vacancies needed to be filled, and they were filled with:
 - Caspar Olevianus – taught in University and preached in Heiliggeistkirche
 - Zacharius Ursinus – taught theology at University

A new catechism is commissioned

- Frederick III commissioned “the preparation of a summary course of instruction or catechism of our Christian Religion, according to the word of God.”
- This new catechism was to be used both in “churches and schools” by “Pastors and Schoolmasters.”
- In this way there would be consistency in teaching, rather than teachers and preachers who “adopt daily changes, or introduce erroneous doctrine.”
- Theological professors, church superintendents, and church leaders, including ordained pastors and laymen had role in writing and editing the catechism.
- Frederick himself also had a hand in the writing

Preface to the catechism (Frederick III)

- “Governing officials not only have the duty to maintain good order and peace in their territory, but also and above all, constantly to admonish and lead them to devout knowledge and fear of the Almighty and His holy word of salvation.”
- Although his predecessors had planted seeds of reform in the Palatinate, these efforts never resulted in the bountiful spiritual harvest that many were hoping for.
- One key reason for the lackluster results was that insufficient attention was paid to the youth who were either “careless in respect to Christian doctrine,” “entirely without Christian instruction,” “unsystematically taught,” or “perplexed with irrelevant and needless questions”—in many cases, it might have been all four.

The Key Architects of the Catechism

- Olevianus:
 - Born in Trier in 1536 , the son of a city councilor
 - Studied law in France and came under the influence of Calvin’s teachings
 - Befriended son of Frederick III
 - Was profoundly impacted by a boat accident in which his friend died, made a commitment to become a minister
 - Was mentored by Calvin, Farel, Bullinger, Beza
 - Returned to Trier and taught Latin, and eventually to preach, for which he was imprisoned
 - Frederick III had him brought to Heidelberg where he preached at the Heiliggeistkirche

- Ursinus
 - From Breslau, original name was Bär
 - Studied under Melanchthon in Wittenberg, knew other leaders including Calvin
 - Returned home to Breslau to teach, used Melanchthon's catechism in his own teaching
 - Was distressed by the controversy in his hometown, moved to Zurich
 - Frederick III requested him to teach in Heidelberg; he moved there and was appointed professor of Dogmatics
 - While there, he wrote two catechisms in addition to his work on the Heidelberg catechism

Heidelberg Catechism, Q and A 1

Question 1. What is thy only comfort in life and death?

Answer. That I with body and soul, both in life and death, am not my own, but belong unto my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ, who, with his precious blood, hath fully satisfied for all my sins, and delivered me from all the power of the devil; and so preserves me that, without the will of my heavenly Father, not a hair can fall from my head; yea, that all things must be subservient to my salvation: and therefore, by his Holy Spirit, he also assures me of eternal life, and makes me sincerely willing and ready henceforth to live unto him.

Unpacking the first Question and Answer (As noted by Prof. Ursinus)

“Comfort is that which results from a certain process of reasoning, in which we oppose something good to something evil, that...we may mitigate our grief, and patiently endure the evil. The good...must necessarily be great...in proportion to the magnitude of the evil with which it is contrasted.”

- The greatest evil is sin and death
- Nothing short of the highest good can be a sufficient remedy
- That which unsaved humanity calls good is left behind at the hour of death
- The highest good we seek never fades
- External rites can neither cleans nor quiet the consciences of men; nor will God be mocked with such offerings.

- A comfort consisting in the assurance of the free remission of sin, and reconciliation with God, by and on account of Christ, and a certain expectation of eternal life, impressed upon the heart by the holy Spirit through the gospel, so that we have no doubt but that we are the property of Christ, and are beloved of God for his sake, and saved forever

The six parts of comfort

1: Our reconciliation with God through Christ: 1 Cor. 7:22, 23

- “²² For he who was called in the Lord as a bondservant is a freedman of the Lord. Likewise he who was free when called is a bondservant of Christ. ²³ You were bought with a price; do not become bondservants of men.
- “If we truly understood whose we are, we would realize that even slavery cannot damage our privileged position in Christ” (RSB Note 7:23)

2: The manner of our reconciliation with God through the blood of Christ: I Peter 1:18, I John 1:7

- “¹⁸ knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold.”
- ⁷ But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.

3: Deliverance from the miseries of sin and death (Christ does not only reconciles us to God, but he also delivers us from the power of the devil, so that sin, death and Satan have no power over us: Hebrews 2:14, 15; I John 3:8

- ¹⁴ Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, ¹⁵ and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.
- ⁸ Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil.

4: The constant preservation of our reconciliation, deliverance, and whatever other benefits Christ has once purchased for us...”Our safety does not lie in our own hands, or strength; for if it did, we should lose it a thousand times every moment”.

5: The turning of all our evils into good: Romans 8:28 “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.”

6: Our full persuasion and assurance of all these great benefits, and of eternal life.

- Assurance is obtained from the testimony of the Holy Spirit working in us true faith and conversion
- From the effects of true faith...such as true penitence, and a firm purpose to believe God and obey all his commandments; for we are assured of having true faith when we have an earnest desire of obeying God

The substance of our comfort therefore is briefly this: - That we are Christ's, and through him reconciled to the Father, that we may be beloved of him and saved, the Holy Ghost and eternal life being given to us.

That this comfort alone is solid, is evident, first, because it alone never fails – no, not in death; for “whether we live, or die, we are the Lord's” and “who shall separate us from the love us Christ”? (Romans 8: 35, 8:35)

Excerpt from Commentary of Ursinus upon the Heidelberg Catechism from the section "Of True Christian Comfort"

That this comfort alone is solid, is evident, first, because it alone never fails--no, not in death; for "whether we live, or die, we are the Lord's ;" and "who shall separate us from the love of Christ ?" ([Rom. 14:8](#); [8:35](#).) And, secondly, because it alone remains unshaken, and sustains us under all the temptations of Satan, who often thus assails the Christian:

- 1. Thou art a sinner. To this, comfort replies--Christ has satisfied for my sins, and redeemed me with his own precious blood, so that I am no longer my own, but belong to him.*
- 2. But thou art a child of wrath and an enemy of God. Answer--I am, indeed, such by nature, and before my reconciliation; but I have been reconciled to God, and received into his favor through Christ.*
- 3. But thou shalt surely die. Ans. Christ has redeemed me from the power of death, and I know that through him I shall come forth from death unto eternal life.*
- 4. But many evils, in the mean-time, befall the righteous. Ans. But Our Lord defends and preserves us under them, and makes them work together for our good.*
- 5. But what if thou fall from the grace of Christ? For thou mayest sin, and faint, for it is a long and difficult road to Heaven. Ans. Christ has not only merited and conferred his benefits upon me, but he also continually preserves me in them, and grants me perseverance, that I may neither faint nor fall from his grace.*
- 6. But what if his grace does not extend to thee, and thou art not of the number of those who are the Lord's? Ans. But I know that grace does extend to me, and that I am Christ's; because the Holy Spirit bears witness with my spirit that I am a child of God; and because I have true faith, for the promise is general, extending to all them that believe.*
- 7. But what if thou hast not true faith? Ans. I know that I have true faith from the effects thereof; because I have a conscience at peace with God, and an earnest desire and will to believe and obey the Lord.*
- 8. But thy faith is weak, and thy conversion imperfect. Ans. Yet it is nevertheless true and unfeigned, and I have the blessed assurance that "to him that hath shall be given." "Lord, I believe, help thou mine unbelief." ([Luke 19:26](#). [Mark 9:24](#).)*

In this most severe and dangerous conflict, which all the children of God experience, Christian consolation remains immovable, and at length concludes: therefore Christ, with all his benefits, pertains even to me.