

A FAITH WORTH
TEACHING

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The Heidelberg Catechism's Enduring Heritage

Edited by
Jon D. Payne and Sebastian Heck



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A Faith Worth Teaching

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FOREWORD

The Heidelberg Catechism: The Secret of Its Success

Herman J. Selderhuis

Sixteenth-century Lutheran theologian Tilemann Heshusius (1527–1588) was justly afraid of the powerful influence the Heidelberg Catechism (HC) might have on young people’s thoughts, convictions, and ways of life. His warnings obviously were not heeded, as the HC did indeed exercise a powerful influence. Almost 450 years later, children and youth around the world are still introduced to that book from Heidelberg. What contributed to the unique success of this catechism? This is an especially pertinent question because the sixteenth century was teeming with smaller and larger catechetical works. Why did the catechism from Heidelberg gain an international hearing, and why was it adopted in countries the world over, serving today as a foundational confessional statement for more than a hundred million Reformed believers?

The witness of German-Dutch painter and poet Anna Maria van Schurman (1607–1678), the first woman to attend lectures at the University of Utrecht, Netherlands, goes a long way toward explaining the success of the HC. She recounts that when she was a little girl, no more than four years old, she was picking flowers in the field with her maid, who consequently bade her recite the first question and answer. As she repeated the words “that I am not my own, but belong...to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ” she became so exhilarated and so filled with the love of Christ that this event and the emotions she experienced were etched into her memory for the rest of her life.¹ Van Schurman’s experience was not unique, according to the testimony of those who love the “Heidelberger” the world over. Lord’s Day 1, together with Lord’s Day 7, in which faith is defined as a “certain knowledge” and “assured confidence” are among the best-known parts of that manual of doctrine.²

1. G. D. J. Schotel, *Anna Maria van Schurman* (’s Hertogenbosch: Muller, 1853), 6.

2. Quotations of the Heidelberg Catechism in this foreword are from *De Nederlandse belijdenisgeschriften*, ed. J. N. Bakhuizen van den Brink (Amsterdam: Ton Bolland, 1976).

What van Schurman described is just what Frederick III (1515–1576) wanted to achieve when he commissioned the production of the HC.

According to the foreword, the elector palatinate wanted to touch both the temporal and eternal aspects of the lives of his subjects in a positive way. This catechism was intended to teach them the fear of the Lord and at the same time lead them toward lives full of confidence that would contribute to the good of society. It was his firmly held conviction that a society that abided by the principles and truths of the HC would surely prosper. That conviction was not unique. Both Roman Catholicism and the leaders of the Reformation were convinced of the value of a catechism. Thus, in 1548 John Calvin (1509–1564) wrote to Edward Seymour (1500–1552), who managed governmental affairs for the still minor Edward VI (1537–1553), that a common canon of doctrine was necessary, a “formula of instruction for little children and for ignorant persons, serving to make them familiar with sound doctrine, so that they may be able to discern the difference between it and the falsehood and corruptions which may be brought forward in opposition to it. Believe me, Monseigneur, the Church of God will never preserve itself without a Catechism.”³

However, it was not only the content of the HC that secured its success but also developments within Reformed Protestantism. The proliferation of the HC and the geographical extension of the Reformed church are roughly congruent. Because of the political situation in the sixteenth century, which was, for the most part, hostile to the Reformed faith in much of Europe, the Reformed lived as pilgrims; thus the HC went wherever Reformed believers went. In Germany, for example, there are extant prints of the HC from Berlin, Danzig, Frankfurt, Elberfeld, Halle, Hanau, Leipzig, Herborn, and Magdeburg.

Another factor, closer to the heart of Reformed Protestantism, contributed to the spread of the HC: the international character of the Reformed faith and confession and of Reformed church polity. Reformed convictions, starting with the biblical truth that heaven is our fatherland, led to great mobility and to a weakened sense of political patriotism. Reformed believers also held to an ecclesiology and polity in which the church exists apart from politics and government. Also, the experience of many Reformed believers who had to flee their home countries on account of their faith created a lifestyle in which traveling, emigration, and immigration were normal. The Reformed pilgrim community of Sea Beggars (*Geuzen*), Huguenots, and

3. John Calvin, *Tracts and Letters*, ed. Henry Beveridge and Jules Bonnet (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2009), 5:191.

postwar emigrants took this catechism—which is as ecumenical or irenic as it is international in character—with them wherever they went and taught it and lived it out in their new and unfamiliar environment.

One of the most attractive and notable features of the HC is its opening words. In contrast with Lutheran catechisms, in which man is considered under the rubric of a baptized member of the church, and with Calvin's catechism, which approaches man under the rubric of a creature made in the image of God, the HC begins with man as the special property of God: "That I with body and soul, both in life and death, am not my own, but belong..." Man is not simply a creature of God or a part of the whole that we call the church but rather an individual who lives in relation to Christ in an experiential and inseparable way. This approach is typical of the practical and personal character of the entire HC. Its basic structure, which relates everything to the individual ("I"), makes it attractive and timelessly relevant.

Hermann Friedrich Kohlbrügge (1803–1875), the Dutch-German theologian in whose person and work the Lutheran and Reformed traditions so marvelously coalesced, made mention of his beloved HC on his deathbed: "The Heidelberger, the plain Heidelberger... Hold to it firmly, my children."⁴ Perhaps these words reveal the true success of the HC—its simplicity and content, which speak of comfort in life and in death.

It is to be welcomed, therefore, that 2013 would feature celebrations of the 450th anniversary of the HC in tours, exhibits, book publications, and conferences. What is much more important, however, is that this document would be increasingly read, studied, and taught in homes, schools, and churches. Much has changed since 1563. The basic questions about life and death, sin and grace, and God and man, however, have remained ever the same. The book you are holding in your hands is a wonderful tool to help you gain access to the content and history of the Heidelberg Catechism.

4. W. Otten, *Uit het levensboek van Dr. H. F. Kohlbrügge* (Houten: Den Hertog, 1992), 142.

EDITORS' PREFACE

Published in 1563, the Heidelberg Catechism has shined forth the blessed truths of the gospel for 450 years. When Elector Frederick III courageously orchestrated the production of a new catechism for his Palatine realm, little did he know the enduring effect it would have on future generations of Christians the world over. In his preface, dated January 19, 1563, Frederick wrote that “we have had prepared and compiled in both German and Latin a concise booklet of instruction or catechism of our Christian religion extracted from the Word of God. This was done so that in the future not only will our young people be instructed in the Christian doctrine in a godly manner and admonished in unanimity, but also so that pastors and school-teachers themselves will have a reliable model and a solid standard.”

For four-and-a-half centuries the Heidelberg Catechism has been used to teach foundational Christian doctrine to God’s people. Providentially, it has served as an abiding standard of orthodoxy. It has been employed as a confessional standard in numerous Reformed churches and denominations around the world. The catechism’s extraordinary blend of sound doctrine, warm piety, and pastoral sensitivity make it one of the most cherished confessions in the Reformed heritage.

In order to celebrate the Heidelberg Catechism’s enduring message on this 450th year of its publication, we have gathered an array of faithful pastor-scholars to contribute to this commemorative volume. The essays focus on the catechism’s dynamic history, rich theology, and fruit-bearing practice. We hope that this collection of essays—like the catechism itself—will be an encouragement to pastors and laypersons alike.

A book like this does not come to fruition without the toil of many. First of all, special thanks must go to Dr. Joel Beeke, Mr. Jay Collier, Mrs. Annette Gysen, and the entire staff at Reformation Heritage Books. It has been a privilege to work with such a first-class publisher. Thanks also must be given to

our two congregations, Grace Presbyterian Church (PCA) in Douglasville, Georgia, and Selbständige Evangelisch-Reformierte Kirche in Heidelberg, Germany. Thank you for giving us the time to work on this project. We also want to thank our wonderful wives and families for their constant encouragement, love, and support. Finally, we want to express our deepest gratitude and highest praise to our faithful Savior, Jesus Christ, who has fully paid for all our sins with His precious blood.

Jon D. Payne
Sebastian Heck

PART 1

The History and Background of the Heidelberg Catechism

CHAPTER 1

The History and People behind the Heidelberg Catechism

Lyle D. Bierma

When the Heidelberg Catechism (HC) first appeared in January 1563, no one would have predicted that people would be celebrating it 450 years later. Its chief author was a twenty-eight-year-old theology professor who had just received his doctorate and begun teaching at the University of Heidelberg a few months before. Its target audience lived in a small territory in a corner of the German Empire. And it was just one of dozens of catechisms coming off the press in Europe at the time.

Within a few months, however, Heinrich Bullinger (1504–1575), leader of the Reformed church in Zurich, was praising it as “the best catechism ever published.”¹ Over the next several decades, it was translated from German into Latin, Dutch, English, Hungarian, French, Greek, Romansh, Czech, and Spanish, and today it is found in a number of African and Asian languages as well. Many scholars regard it as the most irenic and catholic expression of the Christian faith to come out of the Protestant Reformation. It is certainly among the most beloved.

Despite the worldwide fame of this document, we should not forget that it originated in a particular historical setting: a particular time (the early 1560s); a particular place (the city of Heidelberg in the German state known as the Palatinate); and, as the full title suggests, for a particular purpose and audience (*Catechism or Christian Instruction as This Is Conducted in Churches and*

1. Quoted in Fred H. Klooster, “Calvin’s Attitude to the Heidelberg Catechism,” in *Later Calvinism: International Perspectives*, ed. W. Fred Graham, Sixteenth Century Essays and Studies, vol. 22 (Kirksville, Mo.: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1994), 315. Klooster identifies the source of this quotation simply as a letter from Bullinger to a friend. The (original?) German text is reprinted in Carl Pestalozzi, *Heinrich Bullinger: Leben und ausgewählte Schriften*, *Leben und ausgewählte Schriften der Väter und Begründer der reformirten Kirche* (Elberfeld: Friderichs, 1858), 5:415.

Schools of the Electoral Palatinate). These in turn formed part of a larger story of the Protestant Reformation in Germany, and especially of the advance of the Reformation in the German Palatinate. Before we look at the text of the catechism, therefore, we will take a closer look at the context: first, in broad strokes, the development of the Reformation in the Palatinate; second, the specific purposes for which the catechism was composed; and finally, the question of authorship.²

The Reformation of the Palatinate³

The Palatinate was one of the more prominent states in the Holy Roman Empire (Germany) in the sixteenth century. Actually, it was divided into two subterritories, the Lower Palatinate in the Rhineland, with Heidelberg as its capital, and the Upper Palatinate in northern Bavaria. Both were under the rule of the count palatine, who also served as one of the seven electors responsible for choosing the Holy Roman emperor. Like several other parts of the German Empire, the Palatinate changed its territorial religion from Roman Catholicism to Protestantism during the sixteenth century, but, as Charles Gunnoe notes, the Reformation there “underwent the longest incubation phase of any major German territory.”⁴ Lutheran and South German Reformed influences had seeped into the region during the reign of Elector Louis V (r. 1508–1544), but it was not until 1546, nearly thirty years after Luther’s Ninety-Five Theses, that the Palatinate officially became Protestant under the leadership of Louis’s brother, Elector Frederick II (r. 1544–1556).

The Reformation in the German Empire suffered a major setback when the emperor defeated a league of Protestant princes in 1547, and many Roman Catholic practices were reinstated in their territories under the Augsburg Interim (1548). With the Peace of Augsburg in 1555, however, Protestantism became fully legalized in the empire in those states whose rulers were willing to impose on their subjects the Lutheranism of Melancthon’s Augsburg Confession. Therefore, when Louis’s and Frederick’s nephew Otto Henry

2. Parts of this chapter are adapted from Lyle D. Bierma, “The Heidelberg Catechism,” *Tabletalk* 32 (April 2008): 14–17, and are used by permission of the publisher.

3. This summary is based in large part on overviews of the Palatinate Reformation by Fred H. Klooster, *The Heidelberg Catechism: Origin and History* (Grand Rapids: Calvin Theological Seminary, 1982), 1–117, and by Charles D. Gunnoe Jr., “The Reformation of the Palatinate and the Origins of the Heidelberg Catechism, 1500–1562,” in *An Introduction to the Heidelberg Catechism: Sources, History, and Theology, Texts and Studies in Reformation and Post-Reformation Thought*, by Lyle D. Bierma et al. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 15–47.

4. Gunnoe, “Reformation of the Palatinate,” 20.

(r. 1556–1559) came to the throne in early 1556, the Palatinate was poised to enter a significant new phase of reform.

Looming large over this next phase was the figure of Philip Melancthon (1497–1560), himself a native of the Lower Palatinate.⁵ Born in the little town of Bretten, he pursued his education in Bretten, Pforzheim, and Heidelberg—all in the Lower Palatinate—and was awarded a bachelor's degree from Heidelberg University at the age of fourteen before transferring to the university in Tübingen. When he returned to Heidelberg on a visit in 1524, he was honored by the university faculty with a silver goblet in recognition of his many achievements. The next year both Louis V and the peasants of the Palatinate asked him to arbitrate in the peasant uprisings in the area, a service he willingly performed but with little success.

Following the death of Martin Luther (1483–1546), German Lutheranism underwent a division into two major theological parties: the Gnesio-Lutherans, who vigorously defended what they claimed was the pure doctrine of Luther, and the Philippists or Melancthonians, who, with their leader, had been willing to make concessions to Catholicism during the Interim and to modify some of Luther's teachings. Elector Otto Henry's sympathies clearly lay with the Philippist party, and his reforms in the Palatinate bore that stamp. In 1556 he introduced a new Lutheran church order that not only established Melancthon's Augsburg Confession as the doctrinal standard for the Palatinate but also included excerpts from Melancthon's *Examination of Ordinands* (1552), a catechism-like text used to prepare ministerial candidates for ordination. As far back as the rule of Louis V, the Palatine electors had been soliciting advice from Melancthon, but Otto Henry went a step further and invited Melancthon to join the faculty of Heidelberg University and assist with the reform of the Palatinate at close quarters. Melancthon turned down the offer. He did, however, continue as a long-distance advisor, for example, convincing Otto Henry in 1557 to appoint his (Melancthon's) former student Tilemann Heshusius (1527–1588) as head of the theological faculty in Heidelberg in 1557 and assisting with the reorganization of the university a year later.

Although Otto Henry's reform of the Palatinate was influenced to a large extent by Melancthon and his moderate form of Lutheranism, the elector did not hesitate to invite to his territory leaders from other Protestant

5. For the details of Melancthon's life, see Clyde L. Manschreck, *Melancthon: The Quiet Reformer* (New York: Abingdon, 1958); and Robert Stupperich, *Melancthon*, trans. Robert H. Fischer (London: Lutterworth, 1965).

backgrounds as well, including Zwinglians and Calvinists.⁶ It is not clear whether his motive was to build a nucleus of Protestant unity in the Palatinate or merely to fill political, academic, and ecclesiastical vacancies with people of excellent reputation, regardless of their theological persuasion.⁷ Gunnoe suggests it is also possible that he was simply “not a fine connoisseur of theological subtlety.”⁸ In any case, among those he appointed to important posts during his short reign were not only fellow Philippists like Michael Diller (d. 1570), who became an influential member of the Palatinate consistory, but also the Strasbourg Lutheran pastor Johannes Marbach (1521–1581) and the Gnesio-Lutheran professor Tilemann Heshusius, who served as head of the theological faculty and chief superintendent of the Palatine church. What is even more striking is that he employed Stephan Zirler (or Cirler) and Thomas Erastus (1524–1583), both sympathetic to the Zurich Reformation, as his private secretary and personal physician, respectively; Christoph Ehem and François Baudouin (1520–1573), both with Calvinist leanings, as professors of law at the university; and Petrus Boquinus (c. 1518–1582), who has been variously described as a Calvinist and a Bullingerian,⁹ as professor of New Testament.

Therefore, when Otto Henry died after only three years on the throne, most of the major Protestant parties of the day—Gnesio-Lutherans, Philippists, Zwinglians (perhaps better termed late-Zwinglians or Bullingerians), and Calvinists—already had a foothold in the Palatinate. The task of bringing them together was left to Elector Frederick III (1515–1576), who, like his predecessor, began his reign as a convinced Philippist. Frederick had been born and raised a Roman Catholic but was converted to the Lutheran faith by his first wife, Maria, during the early years of their marriage. Even before becoming elector of the Palatinate, however, he found himself moving away from the Gnesio-Lutheranism of his wife and son-in-law, Duke

6. Gustav A. Benrath, “Die Eigenart der pfälzischen Reformation und die Vorgeschichte des Heidelberger Katechismus,” *Heidelberger Jahrbuch* 7 (1963):16. See also Gunnoe, “Reformation of the Palatinate,” 36–37, and Christa Boerke, “The People behind the Heidelberg Catechism,” in *The Church’s Book of Comfort*, ed. Willem van ’t Spijker, trans. Gerrit Bilkes (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2009), 74–88.

7. For the first hypothesis, see Ruth Wesel-Roth, *Thomas Erastus* (Lahr: Schauenberg, 1954), 17. For the second, see Derk Visser, *Zacharias Ursinus, the Reluctant Reformer: His Life and Times* (New York: United Church Press, 1983), 103–4.

8. Gunnoe, “Reformation of the Palatinate,” 36.

9. For the former, see Boerke, “People behind the Catechism,” 74; for the latter see G. P. Hartvelt, *Alles in Hem*, Nieuwe Commentaar Heidelbergse Catechismus (Aalten: Graafschap, 1966), 1:17–18.

John Frederick of Saxony (1529–1595), and toward the more moderate expression of Lutheranism represented by Melanchthon. As governor of the Upper Palatinate (1556–1559) and duke of Palatinate-Simmern (1557–1559), Frederick introduced Otto Henry’s church order and other Melanchthonian reforms into these ancillary territories. He also became a supporter of Melanchthon’s so-called altered version of the Augsburg Confession (1540) and was one of the signatories to the Frankfurt Recess, a statement of Protestant confessional unity drawn up by Melanchthon in 1558.¹⁰

Shortly after Frederick III arrived in Heidelberg in 1559, he became embroiled in an acrimonious debate over the Lord’s Supper. The principal antagonists were the Gnesio-Lutheran Heshusius, a general superintendent of the Palatinate churches, and the Calvinist William Klebitz, a student at the university and deacon at the Holy Spirit Church in Heidelberg. Heshusius vociferously defended a doctrine of the physical eating of the body of Christ in the sacrament and attacked anything less as Zwinglian. Frederick intervened to try to restore peace and ultimately dismissed both men from Heidelberg. In the end, the Gnesio-Lutherans were marginalized and the Reformed understanding of the Supper prevailed as the accepted view. In the aftermath of the controversy Elector Frederick sought Melanchthon’s judgment on how he had handled the dispute. Melanchthon replied in a *Responsio* with a strong endorsement of Frederick’s actions. He also suggested that Christians should not try to penetrate the mystery of the union between sign and signified in the Lord’s Supper but simply embrace the Pauline affirmation in 1 Corinthians 10:16 that the bread of the Supper is a *koinonia* (participation, fellowship, communion) with the body of Christ. Frederick considered Melanchthon’s response important enough to have it published a year later in both its original Latin version and a German translation.

Upon Melanchthon’s death in April 1560, Frederick III found himself looking more and more to the Zurich and Genevan Reformations for inspiration, advice, and personnel. It may be going too far to say that he became a convert to Calvinism,¹¹ but he personally experienced and then engi-

10. On Frederick’s Melanchthonian sympathies, see not only Gunnoe, “Reformation of the Palatinate,” 37; and Klooster, *Heidelberg Catechism*, 83, 104; but also James I. Good, *The Origin of the Reformed Church in Germany* (Reading, Pa.: Daniel Miller, 1887), 128, 134; James I. Good, *The Heidelberg Catechism in Its Newest Light* (Philadelphia: Publication and Sunday School Board of the Reformed Church in the United States, 1914), 133; and Visser, *Zacharias Ursinus*, 1.

11. Bard Thompson, “Historical Background of the Catechism,” in *Essays on the Heidelberg Catechism*, by Bard Thompson et al. (Philadelphia: United Church Press, 1963), 29–30.

neered in the Palatinate what Gunnoe has called a “shift from a Philippist/Gnesio-Lutheran theological axis to a Philippist/Reformed theological axis.”¹² Gnesio-Lutheran advisors, pastors, and professors began leaving the Palatinate voluntarily or were released from their positions, and Frederick filled the vacancies with Philippist and especially Reformed personnel. Among the latter were the Calvinists Wenceslaus Zuleger (1530–1596), chairman of the Heidelberg consistory; Caspar Olevianus (1536–1587), who became rector of Sapience College (a pastoral training school), professor of dogmatics at Heidelberg University, and later minister of two Heidelberg churches; Immanuel Tremellius (1510–1580), professor of Old Testament at the university; and Zacharias Ursinus (1534–1583), Olevianus’s successor at both Sapience College and the university.¹³ During another disputation on the Lord’s Supper between Gnesio-Lutheran and Reformed theologians in Heidelberg in June 1560, Frederick also seems to have become increasingly attracted to the Reformed position. And in early 1561 he was instrumental in getting the German Protestant princes at the Naumburg Conference to agree to Melancthon’s *Variata* (altered) version of the Augsburg Confession (1540) as an acceptable interpretation of the original *Invariata* (unaltered) version of 1530. This allowed for an understanding of the presence of Christ in the Lord’s Supper that more closely approximated, or at least did not rule out, the Calvinist point of view.

As part of this transformation of the Palatinate into a Melancthonian-Reformed territory, Elector Frederick III ordered the preparation of a new catechism for his realm in early 1562. In all likelihood the HC was composed that same year by a committee of churchmen who met periodically over several months to discuss their work. Unfortunately, no records of this process have survived, but there is one source that does provide some background information—Frederick’s own preface to the HC, which he attached to it when he sent it to the publisher on January 19, 1563. His reflections on the need for a new catechism and his mention of the categories of persons involved in its production offer a few glimpses, at least, into the purpose and authorship of the HC.

12. Gunnoe, “Reformation of the Palatinate,” 47.

13. Gunnoe, “Reformation of the Palatinate,” 44–46; Boerke, “People behind the Catechism,” 67–74, 76–78, 85–86.

Purpose of the Catechism¹⁴

Frederick begins his preface by stating that it is his God-given duty not only to promote peace and order among his people “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.” In other words, he is responsible for both the “temporal and eternal welfare” of his subjects.¹⁵ It is the latter responsibility that he was most concerned about. Shortly after coming to power in 1559, he had visited the Palatinate churches to assess their spiritual progress, and what he found was discouraging. The young people especially were growing up “without the fear of God and the knowledge of his Word.” Where doctrinal instruction was being offered, teachers and preachers were using a variety of catechisms, and some instructors were even confusing their students with irrelevant questions and unsound teachings.¹⁶ If government, church, and family are to flourish, he writes, “it is essential that our *youth* be trained in early life, and above all, in the pure and consistent doctrine of the holy Gospel.” Thus, he concludes, the Palatinate needed a single, clear guide to biblical truth. Thus, he explains, “We have secured the preparation of a summary course of instruction or catechism of our Christian Religion, according to the word of God.”¹⁷

Frederick wanted this new catechism first, then, for the training of children and young people—what today we would call youth ministry! But it was not only so that youth could be trained in doctrine and piety, it was “also that the Pastors and Schoolmasters themselves may be provided with a fixed form and model, by which to regulate the instruction of youth, and not, at their option, adopt daily changes, or introduce erroneous doctrine.”¹⁸ All such instructors should thankfully accept this catechism, diligently explain it to the youth in the schools and the common people in the pews, and pattern their own lives after it. For if youth in early life are instructed aright in the Word of God, one can have the assured hope that “it will please Almighty

14. This section is based in part on Klooster, *Heidelberg Catechism*, 153–56, and adapted from Lyle D. Bierma, “The Purpose and Authorship of the Heidelberg Catechism,” in *Introduction to the Heidelberg Catechism*, by Bierma et al., 50–52. A few sentences were taken directly from the latter document and are used with the permission of the publisher.

15. Quoted in George W. Richards, *The Heidelberg Catechism: Historical and Doctrinal Studies* (Philadelphia: Publication and Sunday School Board of the Reformed Church in the United States, 1913), 185, 187. On pages 182–99 Richards provides a facsimile of the German text of the preface and an English translation on the facing pages.

16. Richards, *Heidelberg Catechism*, 189, 191.

17. Richards, *Heidelberg Catechism*, 193–95.

18. Richards, *Heidelberg Catechism*, 195–97.

God also to grant reformation of public and private morals, and temporal and eternal welfare.”¹⁹

The preface suggests, therefore, that Elector Frederick had in view at least three roles for his new catechism: (1) a *catechetical tool* for the teaching of children and young people, (2) a *preaching guide* for the instruction of the laity in the churches, and (3) a *form of confessional unity* for the several Protestant factions in the Palatinate. To be sure, this last objective is not stated in the preface as clearly as the other two. Nonetheless, such phrases as “consistent doctrine of the holy Gospel,” “a fixed form and model,” “not, at their option, adopt daily changes,” and “that you teach, and act, and live in accordance with [the catechism]”²⁰ certainly suggest the doctrinal unity, if not uniformity, that Frederick was seeking to achieve.

That still leaves the question of the theological slant or orientation of this doctrinal summary. Did Frederick III intend the HC to be a distinctively Lutheran, Philippist, Zwinglian, or Calvinist statement of doctrine? Very likely not. Early in his political life, he had avoided theological labels and sought to ground his doctrine in the simple teachings of Scripture. That also seems to be the case here. Never once in the preface to the HC does Frederick mention Luther, Melancthon, Calvin, Beza, Zwingli, or Bullinger. Instead, he speaks in broad terms of “Christian doctrine,” “Christian instruction,” “the pure and consistent doctrine of the holy Gospel,” and a “catechism of our Christian religion, according to the Word of God.”²¹ When one takes into account the different Protestant viewpoints in Heidelberg and the diversity of catechisms in use in the Palatinate prior to the HC, it is hardly surprising that Frederick would commission a standard preaching and teaching guide that sought common theological ground on which all parties could stand.²² At the same time, when one recalls Frederick’s lifelong admiration for Melancthon and the elector’s growing appreciation for certain Reformed doctrines and personnel, we should not be surprised if the catechism he commissioned also reflects something of the Philippist-Reformed theological orientation of the Palatinate Reformation as a whole.²³

19. Richards, *Heidelberg Catechism*, 197–99.

20. Richards, *Heidelberg Catechism*, 193, 195, 197.

21. Richards, *Heidelberg Catechism*, 189, 193, 195.

22. For a fuller treatment of this point, see Lyle D. Bierma, “The Sources and Theological Orientation of the Heidelberg Catechism,” in *An Introduction to the Heidelberg Catechism: Sources, History, and Theology*, by Lyle D. Bierma et al. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 75–102.

23. For a fuller treatment of this point, see Lyle D. Bierma, “The Theological Distinctiveness of the Heidelberg Catechism,” *Theologia Reformata* 49 (December 2006): 331–41.

Authorship of the Catechism

By the time he commissioned the HC in 1562, Frederick III had a diverse group of Melanchthonian, Zwinglian, and Calvinist functionaries in the Palatinate to draw upon for assistance with the project. An old tradition credits two of these people, Ursinus and Olevianus, with the authorship of the HC, but more recent studies have shown that the catechism was first a committee or team project under the watchful eye of Frederick himself. Ursinus and Olevianus were certainly members of this committee, and Ursinus probably played the leading role on it, but the two men can no longer be regarded as the only authors of the document.²⁴

In his preface, Frederick introduces three groups of people who had a role in preparing the catechism: “With the advice and cooperation of our entire theological faculty in this place, and of all superintendents and distinguished servants [chief ministers] of the Church, we have secured the preparation of a summary course of instruction or catechism of our Christian Religion.”²⁵ The first group on the production team, the “entire theological faculty,” comprised the three professors at the university: Tremellius and Ursinus, both Calvinists, and Boquinus, whom, as we have already seen, some have characterized as a Calvinist and others as a Bullingerian. The second part of the team, “all [the] superintendents,” consisted of nine men. The superintendents from that period whose names we know are Olevianus, a Calvinist; Johannes Velvanus (1520–1570), who had Melanchthonian, Zwinglian, and Calvinist sympathies; Johannes Willing (1525–1572) and Johannes Sylvanus (d. 1572), both of whom leaned toward the Zurich Reformation; and Johannes Eisenmenger (1495–1574), a close friend and collaborator of the South German Lutheran Reformer Johannes Brenz (1499–1570).²⁶

The third and final group, the “distinguished servants [chief ministers] of the Church,” included, among others, Olevianus and Diller, a Melanchthonian who gradually moved in a Calvinist theological direction. Olevianus, Diller, and Boquinus were also part of the *Kirchenrat* (church council or consistory), which was made up of three ministers and three laymen and had responsibility for regulating Palatine ecclesiastical affairs. If, in fact, the entire

24. For a more comprehensive treatment of the question of authorship, see Bierma, “Purpose and Authorship,” 52–74, from which a few sentences in this section were used by permission of the publisher.

25. Quoted in Richards, *Heidelberg Catechism*, 193, 195.

26. Gerrit den Hartogh, *Voorzienigheid in donker licht: Herkomst en gebruik van het begrip ‘Providentia Dei’ in de reformatorische theologie, in het bijzonder bij Zacharias Ursinus* (Heerenveen: Groen, 1999), 31; Boerke, “People behind the Catechism,” 78–83.

consistory was involved in the preparation of the catechism, the other three members would have been the laymen Zirler and Erastus, both influenced by the Zurich Reformation, and Zuleger, a Calvinist.²⁷

The member of this theologically diverse drafting committee who likely functioned as the primary author of the catechism was Zacharias Ursinus, whose pilgrimage from Philippism to Calvinism mirrored that of Frederick III and the Palatinate Reformation as a whole.²⁸ Ursinus was born in 1534 into a Lutheran family in the Silesian city of Breslau. He was probably catechized there as a child by the Melanchthonian preacher Ambrosius Moibanus (1494–1554), who had helped to introduce the Reformation to Breslau in the 1520s. In 1550, at the age of fifteen, Ursinus enrolled at Wittenberg University, where he became a student, friend, and theological ally of Philip Melanchthon, even accompanying his teacher to Torgau when the plague descended upon Wittenberg in 1552. His deep devotion to his mentor becomes clear in a letter he wrote to a friend when the Gnesio-Lutherans accused Melanchthon of abandoning Luther's teaching and moving closer to Calvin:

I am of the opinion that Dr. Philip teaches what is right, and has been fortunate enough to teach us in a holy and pure way, the real substance of the holy sacrament. Dr. Philip never swerves, but sticks to what is true, secure, important and necessary, never losing sight of what is sublime and divine. Personally, I do not hesitate to confess that I have benefited and learned more from his impressive method of teaching than from the vague commentaries of his opponents.²⁹

After completing his studies in Wittenberg in 1557, Ursinus embarked on a study tour of the major centers of the Reformation to become acquainted with some of the leaders of the evangelical movement. His first stop was in Worms, where he joined Melanchthon at a religious colloquy between Catholics and Protestants. He then began an extended journey to Strasbourg, Basel, Zurich, Bern, Lausanne, and finally Geneva, where he met Calvin and received a set of the Reformer's works as a personal gift. Stopping again in Zurich on the way home, he became better acquainted with Bullinger,

27. J. F. Gerhard Goeters, "Caspar Olevianus als Theologe," in *Monatshefte für Evangelische Kirchengeschichte des Rheinlandes* (1988–1989): 303; Boerke, "People behind the Catechism," 83–88.

28. Detailed biographical information on Ursinus can be found in Karl Sudhoff, *C. Olevianus und Z. Ursinus* (Elberfeld: R. L. Friderichs, 1857); Good, *Heidelberg Catechism*; Visser, *Reluctant Reformer*. Cf. also Erdmann K. Sturm, *Der junge Zacharias Ursin: Sein Weg vom Philippismus zum Calvinismus* (Neuenkirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1972).

29. Ursinus to Crato, January 10, 1557, English translation quoted in Good, *Heidelberg Catechism*, 246.

Zwingli's successor and the most influential leader of the Zurich church, and with the Italian Calvinist Peter Martyr Vermigli (1499–1562), who seems to have made the greatest theological impact on Ursinus.

In 1558, Ursinus began his professional teaching career at the gymnasium (high school) in Breslau. However, his use of Melanchthon's *Examination of Ordinands* as a classroom textbook and his budding relationships with several leading Reformed theologians led several Gnesio-Lutheran ministers in the city to suspect him of heterodoxy, especially since he supported Melanchthon's rejection of Christ's bodily presence in the eucharistic elements. To explain his position on the sacraments and defend himself against the accusations of the Gnesio-Lutherans, Ursinus prepared 123 *Theses on the Sacraments* (1559),³⁰ some of which he derived from his teacher Melanchthon. The theses so impressed Melanchthon that he is reported to have said that he had "never seen anything so brilliant as in this work."³¹

Tensions between the two Lutheran parties in Breslau precipitated Ursinus's departure in April 1560, just a week after the death of Melanchthon. The coincidence of these two events, the death of his long-time mentor and his exodus from Breslau, seems to have represented for Ursinus a critical point in his movement away from Lutheranism and into the Reformed orbit. In the fall of 1560 he made his way back to Zurich, where he studied with Vermigli for nearly a year before accepting an invitation from Elector Frederick III to join his team of Reformers in the Palatinate. When Ursinus arrived in Heidelberg in the fall of 1561, therefore, he had made a long journey, theologically as well as geographically, from Wittenberg to Heidelberg by way of Geneva and Zurich. This exposure to leading theologians of the various Protestant branches would make him especially well suited for the task of composing a new consensus catechism for the Palatinate church.

The literary features of the HC suggest that the text was the work of a single craftsman of great skill, and the circumstantial evidence for Ursinus as that craftsman is compelling.³² First, he had considerable experience in teaching, translating, and composing catechetical material prior to and during his

30. Zacharias Ursinus, "Theses complectentes breviter et perspicue summam verae Doctrinae de Sacramentis," in *Zachariae Ursini...volumen tractationem theologiarum* (Neustadt: Harnisch, 1584), 1:339–82.

31. According to Sudhoff, Melanchthon's reaction was reported in a letter Ursinus received from his friend Ferinarius. *Olevianus und Ursinus*, 5.

32. For more on the evidence summarized here, see Fred Klooster, "The Priority of Ursinus in the Composition of the Heidelberg Catechism," in *Controversy and Conciliation: The Reformation and the Palatinate 1559–83*, ed. Derk Visser (Allison Park, Pa.: Pickwick, 1986), 73–100.

work on the Heidelberg project. In fact, in the two years before the publication of the HC, Ursinus authored two other catechisms, both of which left their stamp on the HC's text. His Smaller Catechism of late 1561 or early 1562 was a simple instructional tool for lay adults and children that served as a preliminary draft for the HC. Not only are the theme, threefold division, and substructure of the Smaller Catechism and HC the same, but also parallel phrases from at least ninety of the questions and answers in the former can be found in 110 of the questions and answers in the latter. Ursinus's Larger Catechism, probably composed in late 1562 as a textbook for advanced courses in theology, also influenced the HC. At least twenty-eight questions have linguistic parallels in the HC that cannot be traced to the Smaller Catechism.³³

Following the publication of the HC, Ursinus also became its chief interpreter and defender. In August 1563, just seven months after the catechism left the press, Ursinus replaced Olevianus as the preacher of the catechism sermon in Heidelberg on Sunday afternoons. He also employed the HC as the foundation for lectures on dogmatics that were later compiled by his students into the magisterial *Commentary of Dr. Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism*.³⁴ Finally, in 1564 he published three treatises, two of them on behalf of the theological faculty at the university, defending the catechism against Catholic and Gnesio-Lutheran attacks. All these considerations, in addition to his diverse theological training and moderate, irenic disposition, point to Ursinus as the primary author of the HC.

What, then, was the role of Olevianus? For centuries his name was associated either with writing an exposition of the covenant of grace that served as one of the rough drafts of the HC or with converting Ursinus's Smaller Catechism into the final German version. Recent scholarship has shown, however, that Olevianus produced all of his works on the covenant *after* the appearance of the HC and that there is no hard evidence that he was responsible for the final German edition. The most that we can say is that he was a member of the drafting committee and may have had more than just a minor role in the project.³⁵

In the last analysis, of course, the father of the HC was Elector Frederick III himself. It was he who commissioned the catechism, oversaw its production, secured its approval by a Heidelberg synod in 1563, and defended it before

33. For an introduction to and English translation of Ursinus's Smaller and Larger Catechisms, see Bierma et al., *Introduction to the Heidelberg Catechism*, 137–223.

34. Zacharias Ursinus, *The Commentary of Dr. Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism*, trans. G. W. Williard (1851; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954).

35. See Bierma, "Purpose and Authorship," 59–67.

an imperial diet three years later. Above all, as his preface indicates, it was he who set the tone of the HC—biblical, devotional, and, to a certain extent, ecumenical. What emerged from the process that he guided was a document with an exquisite blend of doctrine, piety, and pastoral concern. That combination perhaps more than anything else explains why this sixteenth-century catechism from the Palatinate eventually found admirers in every part of the world and is still widely used in Reformed and Presbyterian churches after nearly half a millennium.