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1563 – 2013

450 Years Heidelberg Catechism

Creation, Content, Impact*

We may venture to assert that the Heidelberg Catechism represents a good profession of faith of the reformed church, a church which is based on the Gospel and renewed through the Gospel.

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1)

A Catechism

What is that? What is it for?

The purpose of a catechism is to empower believers and enable them to convey knowledge, make sound judgments and support them in their thoughts, words and actions regarding their faith

The word “catechism” is derived from a Greek verb originally meaning “to sound from above” in the sense of “teaching, instructing”. The first Christian communities used it to refer to oral instruction prior to or after baptism.

This instruction comprised the profession of faith, the double commandment of love and the Lord’s Prayer. At a later stage, the Ten Commandments and texts substantiating baptism and Holy Communion were added as well as further texts. In later centuries it was this collection, accompanied by additional explanations, which was referred to as catechism.

A catechism is also a compilation and succinct explanation of what Christians are expected to know and what they can rely on in their own lives, and what they can pass on to the next generation. Therefore, “Catechism or Christian instruction....” are the first words of the original title of the Heidelberg Catechism.

Passing on the faith and knowledge of religious texts is a tradition which is based on the Bible and constituted a practice long before Christian communities were established. Numerous passages in the Old and subsequently in the New Testament mention this commitment.

A good catechism is based on the testimonies of faith contained in the Bible and encourages reading the Holy Scriptures. A good catechism must also be socially relevant. This at least was the intention of the Heidelberg Catechism; it was not destined to place only the “eternal” but also the “temporal welfare” of humans on a sound foundation and to transform its users into responsible members of society.

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In the 16th century, several new catechisms appeared in the aftermath of the Reformation. Their aim was to reinforce the new insights of faith and to secure them for future generations.

Martin Luther's Small Catechism of 1529, the Geneva Catechism of 1542 and the Heidelberg Catechism of 1563 are a few of the best known catechisms from that period. In particular, the Martin Luther Catechism and the Heidelberg Catechism were widely disseminated and attained a lasting impact.

By the same token, the Roman Catholic church also published new catechisms in the 16th century, one of them being the Catechismus Romanus of 1566, written on the basis of a decision of the Council of Trent, which ended in 1563.

In the following centuries, new catechisms were compiled in all faiths. However, their impact was mostly limited to their own period and region.

Among the catechisms published in the 20th century we can find the "Protestant Catechism for Adults" (1975) and the "Catechism of the Catholic Church" (1992).

2)

The Heidelberg Catechism

Why was a new catechism created in Heidelberg?

It was at a relatively late stage that the Reformation was introduced to the Electoral Palatinate [Kurpfalz], a region between the Rhine and the Neckar, and to Northern Bavaria. Despite several attempts made by Elector Frederic II (1482-1556), it was not until the reign of his successor Otto Henry (1502-1559) that the reformatory transformation could take hold. As he died after a short rule of only three years, he was not able to complete the task of reinforcing the Protestant faith.

His successor Frederic III continued this task. He was, however, confronted with a tense situation with regard to the different denominations of Reformation. A striking example of this were the disputes regarding Holy Communion, which flared up again in the mid-16th century and were carried out with great vehemence at the royal seat of Heidelberg.

The new elector was obliged to put a quick end to these disputes and to unify the Electoral Palatinate, an important region of the German Empire that had been affected by the Reformation in many ways. He therefore wanted to overcome ignorance and insecurity regarding Protestant doctrine and place the life of his subjects, whose wellbeing he was committed to, on a better and more standardized educational level.

The educational publication that later became known as the "Heidelberg Catechism" – after its place of creation – was written in an effort to serve this push for modernization. It was intended to provide a guideline of Christian education for both teachers and learners in schools and churches, and lay the foundation for a good life.

As the elector himself had adopted religious convictions close to the opinions of Swiss and French reformers, the professors he appointed to Heidelberg University adhered to this denomination or were inclined towards it. Among them we find Caspar Olevianus from Trier and Zachary Ursinus from Breslau, a student of Philipp Melanchton known for his conciliatory positions.

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Elector Palatine Frederic III, son of Count Palatine John II and his wife Beatrix of Baden, was born in Simmern on 14 February 1517. He was educated at the Catholic courts of Nancy, Liège and Brussels but became a supporter of the Reformation under the influence of his first wife, Mary of Brandenburg-Kulmbach, who was of Lutheran faith.

Following the death of his relative, the childless Elector Palatine Otto Henry, he was appointed elector in 1559.

The introduction of a catechism with emphasis on reformed Protestantism, which became the pillar of a new church order, led to accusations against him of having jeopardized the “Augsburg Settlement” of 1555. He was pressured to revoke his positions, albeit without success. It was this steadfastness that supposedly led to the attribute “the Pious” being added to his name. Frederic was pious primarily in the sense that he read the Bible as a source of knowledge of God’s word, and from this knowledge he developed an independent faculty of judgement.

The Protestants who were persecuted in France and in the parts of the Netherlands under Spanish occupation received Frederic’s particular sympathy and support. He invited them to settle in the Palatinate, for instance in Frankenthal and Schönau (Odenwald) in 1562.

Frederic died at the age of 61 on 26 October 1576 and was buried in the Holy Spirit church in Heidelberg.

3)

Patron and authors

Who wrote the Heidelberg Catechism?

Because so many sources have been lost, it is not possible to unequivocally establish authorship of the catechism. It can be assumed, however, that Zachary Ursinus was its principal author.

This professor, who taught dogmatics at the faculty of theology, had written two textbooks, a comprehensive one for university studies (*Summa Theologiae*) and a shorter version for general education (*Catechesis Minor*). The high degree of consistency between both works and the later catechism in terms of language and content allows us to assume that they may have been “preliminary steps”. It is uncertain whether the other professors at the faculty, Emanuele Tremellio and Pierre Bouquin, had an influence on the text. However, they certainly participated in editing the final version, as did the members of the leadership of the Palatinate church, among them Caspar Olevianus and the physician Thomas Erastus as well as other influential theologians at the elector’s court.

The biblical passages quoted in the catechism were included at the explicit request of the patron, Elector Frederic III. On 19 January 1563, he signed his introduction to the text at the end of a convention lasting several days and attended by all church superintendents of the Palatinate, thus releasing the catechism for printing. The book was printed in early February in the workshop of Johann Mayer and was entitled

“Catechism or Christian instruction as performed in the churches and schools of the Electoral Palatinate”

For a long time, Caspar Olevianus was considered co-author of the catechism. Today a different view prevails. The only question now attributed to him is question 80, which deals with the difference between Holy Communion and the papal mass. This question was not part of the first edition. It was added in handwriting shortly after the first version had been published and then printed in the second edition. After an additional extension, it appeared in its final form in the third edition.

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Zachary Ursinus

was born in Breslau on 15 July 1534 as son of the Lutheran deacon Caspar Beer. The name "Ursinus" is a Latin rendition of the family's original German name. At the age of 15 he began studying with Philipp Melanchthon in Wittenberg, and in 1557 Melanchthon took the gifted student to a religious disputation in Worms, from where he began an extensive study tour taking him to Switzerland and to France. There he met Heinrich Bullinger, Peter Martyr Vermigli and John Calvin.

After his return to Wittenberg, he obtained a teaching position at Elisabethschule in Breslau. However, he was suspected of disseminating reformed doctrine as a result of his support for his teacher Melanchthon, who had adopted the Calvinist position in the Holy Communion dispute.

In order to avoid more serious conflicts, Ursinus asked to be dismissed and travelled to Zurich. While there, he was summoned by Elector Palatine Frederic III to take charge of clergy training at Collegium Sapientiae in Heidelberg, a position he assumed in 1561. After having completed his doctorate in 1562, he was also offered the chair for dogmatics at the same institution.

When the Lutheran confession was reintroduced after the death of Frederic III in 1576, Ursinus left Heidelberg. He was able to continue his teaching career at the newly established "Collegium Casimirianum" in Neustadt an der Haardt (today Neustadt an der Weinstrasse), where he died at the age of 48 on 6 March 1583. He was buried in the collegiate church.

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Caspar Olevianus

was born on 10 August 1536 in Olevig near Trier. After studying law in Paris, Orléans and Bourges, where he was in contact with the clandestine reformed community, and a short stint as a lawyer in Trier, he studied theology in Geneva and Zurich with Calvin, Bullinger and Vermigli. Starting in 1559, he preached for the small Protestant community in Trier. Following serious conflicts with the Catholic authorities, he was forced to leave the city again. However, Elector Frederic III accepted him at Collegium Sapientiae in Heidelberg. In 1561 he was offered the chair for dogmatics at the university, which he abandoned soon afterwards in order to assume the position of theological councillor with the church leadership of the Electoral Palatinate.

Following the death of Frederic III, Olevianus was deprived of all his functions. He received new responsibilities as educator and teacher of theology in Berleburg and Herborn. He died on 15 March 1587 at the age of 50 and was buried in the Herborn town church.

4)

Structure, content, language

Clear, personal and with a biblical foundation

The Heidelberg Catechism is a compilation consisting of 129 questions and answers.

The first two questions may be termed “preamble”. They contain in summary the foundation and purpose of the Catechism: to know what is the sole consolation in life and death and the knowledge required for this.

In a three-part structure which already constitutes the basis for the answers to the first two questions, the Catechism continues to unfold in a series of further questions and answers.

The three parts are captioned as follows:

“Misery » (questions 3-11)

“Deliverance” (questions 12-85)

“Gratitude” (questions 86-129)

In the first and shortest part, the Catechism describes humans as being in need of redemption due to their self-caused remoteness from God and the consequences of this remoteness. In the second part, the Catechism expounds – on the basis of the Apostle’s Creed and the explanation of baptism and Holy Communion – on how humans can be redeemed from this situation. In the third part, the Catechism explains, through exegesis of the Ten Commandments and the Lord’s Prayer, how humans can live in gratitude for this redemption and in accordance with it.

The actual text of the Catechism is supplemented by biblical passages mentioned in the margins of the text. Amounting to a total of over 700 from the Old and New Testament, they are intended as evidence that the statements are founded in the Bible, and they encourage users of the Catechism to read the Bible independently

The Catechism is written in rhythmical prose. This makes it easier to recite and memorize. The language is concise and clear, but nonetheless does not lack warmth. Many questions are addressed in a personal style: “What do you understand...?”, “What consoles you...?”, “How does this help us...?”. The answers are written in a similar style: concrete and personal.

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Initially the numbering of the questions appeared only in the 1563 Latin translation of the Catechism, which was entitled “Catechesis Religionis Christianae, quae traditur in ecclesiis et scholis Palatinatus”. This translation was based on the third edition of the German version, which became the authoritative text. The translation was conceived for use in Latin schools and universities and was also necessary for people who did not speak German, such as the foreign professors at Heidelberg University. Thus John Calvin, a Frenchman, received the Catechism in a Latin translation. His former student Caspar Olevianus sent him and Theodor Beza two copies on 4 April 1563.

The first German edition with numbered questions appeared in 1570.

5)

Climate, superstition, science

In what environment was the Catechism written?

The Heidelberg Catechism was written at a time when life in the Electoral Palatinate was marked by climate changes that affected all of central Europe. Frequent bad harvests prompted the government of the elector to prohibit the wasting of food, for instance at major festivities. This is reflected in the Catechism, which states that “God forbids any squandering of his gifts” (HC 110).

The plague constituted another threat to life. It raged in several waves in the years in which the Catechism was written. Therefore, for a certain period, the elector’s court and the university had to be removed from Heidelberg. It is no coincidence that word pairs like “rain and drought, fruitful and lean years, food and drink, health and sickness” are often mentioned in the Catechism (HC 27).

Superstition, astrology and fortune telling were rampant. They were forbidden by a law promulgated in 1562 in order to protect the population from the material and mental damage they caused. People were also warned not to give credence to accusations of sorcery. This problem is also addressed in the Catechism: according to the answer to question 94, God wishes me to “avoid and shun all idolatry, sorcery and superstitious rites ...”.

Despite all imponderabilities of life, education and science were not neglected. The University of Heidelberg attracted students from all over Europe, and the library located on the gallery of the Holy Spirit Church – later known as “Bibliotheca Palatina” – grew steadily. At this stage no one could foresee that, only 60 years later, this library and all its precious works, among them the church order published in 1563, which contained the Heidelberg Catechism, would be taken to Rome following the conquest of the Electoral Palatinate by Catholic troops.

6)

Dissemination and impact

How and where did the Catechism become known?

In the Electoral Palatinate the Catechism found public approval due to its inclusion in the church order. It was applied in schools and religious services and commented by Zachary Ursinus and Caspar Olevianus in their sermons.

Gradually the Catechism spread to other German territories, for instance Sayn Wittgenstein, Nassau-Dillenburg, Bentheim-Tecklenburg, Frankfurt, Herborn and many other places.

As early as 1563, an edition was printed for the Netherlands, where it rapidly gained popularity, an important reason being the persecution of the Protestants by the Spanish occupiers. The Catechism was recommended by a convention of refugee congregations that took place in Wesel in 1568, and also by the Emden synod of exile congregations in 1571. The synod of Dordrecht in 1618/19 recommended it as a basis for the profession of faith. It was disseminated in Poland, Hungary and Transylvania and, in the 17th century, also in some of the Swiss cantons. Commercial relations and emigration brought the Catechism to North America, southern Africa and South-East Asia.

Proponents of Protestant Orthodoxy and Pietism dealt with the Catechism in a productive way by publishing new editions and commentaries. After it had undergone renewed transformations in the period of enlightenment, the Catechism found new strength in the middle of the 19th century. The anniversary of 1863 was celebrated on an international scale.

As a result of the controversy about church positions in National-Socialist Germany, Karl Barth developed a deep appreciation for the Catechism. The Theological Declaration of Barmen in 1934 is influenced by the Heidelberg Catechism in its formulations and its theology.

Increased empiricism in education and the emphasis on new topics in theology led to a marginalization of the Catechism with regard to its use in religious instruction. However, it continued to be appreciated as a source of theological orientation.

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The Catechism was a pivotal element of the new Palatinate church order, which was introduced in November 1563. The order gave precise instructions on how to apply the Catechism. For instance, one portion should be “recited to the people clearly and intelligibly” before the sermon in all church services. For this purpose, the Catechism was divided into nine sections, so that it could be “read completely on nine Sundays”.

However, most editions of the Catechism, to this day, continue to favour a division into 52 yearly sections. According to this structure, the Catechism was to be explained and commented every Sunday afternoon. “Furthermore, a ... catechism sermon should be held every Sunday afternoon; first, after a song by the congregation, the servant of the church should say the Lord’s Prayer and pray to God for good understanding of his word, and then he should read the Ten Commandments to the congregation in an understandable manner. Then he should explain some questions of the Catechism and comment on them simply and briefly, in such a manner that he should be able to preach the entire Catechism at least once a year.”

These so-called catechism or instructional services continue to be held in some regions and congregations to this very day.

7)

Prophet, priest and king

What does the Catechism say about Jesus Christ?

The thoughts expressed in the Heidelberg Catechism centre, in large parts, around the figure and the teachings of Jesus Christ. The answer to the first question already states clearly that belonging to him is an all-encompassing comfort. Jesus Christ is described as a “true God and ... a true, righteous human (HC 18), who brings us justice and a new life. His name “Jesus”, which is rendered as “Saviour” in the Catechism, illustrates his impact: he “saves” humans from their sins (HC 29).

The reference to Jesus as “Christ”, meaning “the anointed one”, is also explained (HC 31). The Catechism establishes a close connection to the duties of the prophets, priests and kings of Israel, who were anointed as a sign that God had chosen them for their task. Jesus manifests himself as such an “anointed one” in three ways. First of all, he assumes the service of a prophet and teacher, revealing God’s secret council and will. Secondly he performs the function of a priest and intervenes in favour of humans by redeeming them through his death on the cross and constantly soliciting God the Father on their behalf in his prayers. Thirdly, as a king, he cares in word and spirit that human beings remain protected and sustained through the redemption attained for them.

The particular quality inherent in this description of Christ’s services is that the persons connected with Jesus by their faith partake in this anointment and are therefore called “Christians”. They are also called upon and empowered to fulfil the services of prophet-teacher, priest and king: they spread the name of Jesus Christ, give their life for the life of others and “strive, with a free conscience, against sin and the devil in this life” (HC 32).

By the same token, they remain connected to Christ after death and partake in his Kingdom and in heavenly joy.

8)

Inclined toward all evil

What does the catechism say about humankind?

The Heidelberg Catechism paints a differentiated picture of humankind. On the one hand it claims that we have “a natural tendency to hate God and [our] neighbour” (HC 5). On the other hand, the Catechism considers that through “our godly living” others “may be won over to Christ” (HC 86).

This double statement on man is one of the Catechism’s main tenets, as indeed the Catechism views humankind from two points of view. One of these is that humans are sinners alienated from God – with negative effects: humans are “unable to do any good and inclined toward all evil” (HC 8).

However, the dominant perspective is a different one. Through Jesus Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection man is no longer a sinner, his old self. The new reality is that man is reconciled with God, and God views him as if he had “never sinned or been a sinner” (HC 60). He is free to live a “godly” life (HC 86).

In the eyes of the Heidelberg Catechism, this is the new man. Humans confide in God and recognize him, they are blessed with gifts that they use for the benefit of others, and they also praise God with their deeds.

But this is not humankind by nature. The Catechism is critical of an image of man according to which every human has a good core. However, it also distances itself from a negative image of man that sees only his dark sides.

The Catechism is realistic. Even if man lives as a liberated being whose life is no longer determined by sin, sin continues to bear relevance to his life. However, the decisive point is that God trusts man to live in community with him and his fellow-men and to shape this community in a positive way.

9)

A community of saints

What does the Catechism say with regard to the church?

In its answer to the question “what do you believe concerning the holy catholic church?” the Heidelberg Catechism speaks of a community chosen from the entire human race which exists by virtue of having been congregated and sustained by “the Son of God through his Spirit and Word ... and united in true faith” (HC 54).

The Catechism does not use the word “church” in this context, an expression of the fact that God’s community did not begin with the church and does not end at its limits. However, we may believe that God’s choice-oriented and sustaining action is reflected in the church. Thus the church partakes in his community worldwide, granting it an ecumenical character from the outset.

This community that exists “from the beginning of the world to its end” is not an abstract entity. The individual attains appreciation in it and gives it a face. The Catechism emphasizes that “I too” am and always will be a living member of this community, not on my own account, but because the Son of God preserves and sustains the community.

Such a worldwide community requires communal organization and development on a local basis.

According to the understanding expressed in the Catechism, all believers can contribute to this because through their closeness to Jesus Christ they share in his “treasures and gifts” (HC 55). They should “use these gifts readily and joyfully”.

At this point the Catechism does not mention concrete duties or even official functions, leaving space for different church and community designs. It regards “service and enrichment of the other members” as a model and aim of community action. For this purpose every person should invest his gifts and treasures, and the order and organization of a community and church should be in accordance with this premise.

10)

Ethics out of gratitude

What does the Catechism say about good works?

The Heidelberg Catechism is a book emphasizing practical life and Christian ethics at the same time. It shows ways as to how Christians can lead a responsible life.

In this context, gratitude becomes the key word: we do not do good deeds due to internal or external constraints, but out of gratitude to God. Since he redeemed human beings through Jesus Christ and, through his Holy Spirit, “restored them in his image” (HC 86), they should live accordingly. This good deed leads to the “rising-to-life of the new self”, who “in wholehearted joy” and almost sensually shapes his life according to God’s will in “love and delight” (HC 90). Consequently, doing good works becomes the essence of a believer’s life.

What then is the criterion for faith-oriented actions? “What are good works?” the Catechism asks (HC 91). In its answer, it refers to God’s law citing the Ten Commandments” (HC 92). They are explicitly understood as a good gift from God. In this context the Catechism values, on the basis of John Calvin’s teachings, the positive sense of the Commandments. Not only do they forbid certain forms of behaviour, but they also offer guidance for positive action, for fulfilling God’s will and helping one’s neighbour. Regarding the sixth commandment, “You shall not murder”, the Catechism does not only speak of the prohibition to kill a person, but also of the need to invest in his wellbeing, to be friendly towards him and to protect him from harm to the best of one’s ability.

Nobody, the Catechism says, will achieve perfection, not even the most pious. However, the beginning of a life in gratitude will have been made (HC 114).

Prayer is also a pivotal duty of Christians, and the Catechism even refers to it as “the most important part of thankfulness” (HC 166). To do what God commands and to pray: both are aspects of the “fruits of gratitude”.

11)

Approval and opposition

Does the Catechism constitute a challenge?

Although the Catechism met with widespread approval, it was also confronted with vehement opposition. Early on, indeed in the year of its publication, it was attacked by some Lutheran theologians who wrote polemic publications describing its “deficiencies”. They published a “refutation” and warned of the “slanderous lies of the Heidelberg theologians”. Statements on Christology and the sacraments were the principal object of their criticism. Not only Catholics took offence to question 80, in which the Roman-Catholic understanding of the Holy Communion was sharply criticized. In 1977 and again in 1994 the Alliance of Reformed Churches in Germany published comments qualifying the rigorousness of this statement.

However, the Catechism was also contested from within reformed Protestantism. Several pastors criticized the introduction of a committing profession of faith and demanded freedom of teaching. Time and again the Catechism was perceived as not being up-to-date, and it was modified or replaced by other catechisms.

New insights in pedagogy led to increased scepticism towards a form of instruction based on knowledge acquired by rote, an attitude directed also against catechism instruction.

Between the anniversaries of 1913 and 1963, we again witness an increased ecclesiastical interest in the Catechism. As reformed Protestantism always judges creeds according to the Bible and up-to-date insights, there was general approval but also criticism depending on the respective point view and challenge. New creeds were written and gained importance, such as 1934 in Barmen and 1986 in Belhar (South Africa).

The question remains as to whether a text written in the century of Reformation can, in a different cultural and time context, convey Christian faith and culture in such a way that the text is recognizable as biblically founded and at the same time relevant to the present.

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Shortly after its publication, it became clear that the Catechism was too detailed for children, young people and even for some adults. Therefore an abridged version presenting an overview was added in 1564. In 1576 the “Small Heidelberger Catechism” containing 61 short questions and answers was published. In 1598 an even shorter version with only 22 questions was printed.

In the following centuries, attempts were made time and again to facilitate access to the Catechism by modifying or shortening it. “School or youth editions” appeared, some of which with commentaries.

A simplified edition for youth instruction in Protestant communities was published by the Alliance of Reformed Churches in 1961 and adopted by the General Convention of Reformed Churches in the GDR in 1969.

Since the 1950s, large amounts of material for religious instruction have been published.

In 2011, a “Catechism for Children” was published in the Netherlands on the basis of the Heidelberg Catechism. In the same year an abridged version for the social network “Twitter” was created.

Translation: Nicholas Yantian