

**Guilt, Grace and Gratitude:
An Introduction to the Heidelberg Catechism**

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Frederick III, Elector Palatine



Zacharias Ursinus



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Guilt, Grace, and Gratitude

An Introduction to the Heidelberg Catechism Lesson One: Background and History

Books

The most readily accessible edition is that of the Christian Reformed Church: *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions* (Faith Alive Christian Resources). This also contains three ancient creeds (Apostles', Nicene, and Athanasian), along with the Blegic Confession and the Canons of Dordt (which, along with the HC are often called 'the Three Forms of Unity' and form the confessional basis of those Reformed Churches of German or Dutch descent). The CRC also makes the HC available online at http://www.crcna.org/pages/heidelberg_main.cfm.

There are many helpful resources on the HC. Here are some of the most accessible:

Cornerstone's Sandy Finlayson wrote three very helpful articles on the HC in comparison with the Westminster Catechisms for the OPC magazine, *New Horizons*. These are now available online at www.opc.org/new_horizons/NH05/HeidelbergWestminster.html

G I Williamson, *The Heidelberg Catechism: A Study Guide* (Presbyterian and Reformed). This is a brief commentary, with suggested questions and discussion topics. Probably the best place to start for those unfamiliar with the HC.

Lyle D Bierma, *An Introduction to the Heidelberg Catechism: Sources, History, and Theology* (Baker). Not really an introduction; more a scholarly tour of the relevant history.

There are many expositional commentaries on the HC. Here are just a few examples:

Zacharias Ursinus, *A Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism* (Presbyterian and Reformed). The earliest commentary, written by the principal author of the HC.

George W Bethune, *Guilt, Grace, Gratitude: Lectures on the Heidelberg Catechism* (Banner of Truth). Nineteenth century Princeton theologian.

Herman Hoeksema, *The Triple Knowledge* (Reformed Free Publishing Association). Perhaps the best known of the modern commentaries, by the founder of the Protestant Reformed Church.

Fred W Klooster, *Our Only Comfort* (Faith Alive). Distinguished Calvin Seminary professor offers the fruit of a lifetime's teaching on the catechism.

Otto Thelemann, *An Aid to the Heidelberg Catechism* (Douma Publications). Standard introductory commentary.

The single best thing I have discovered on the HC is not even published. 'The Heidelberg Catechism: Origin and History' is the 450 plus page syllabus notes of Professor Fred Klooster's Calvin Seminary classes on the HC. Available for \$20 from the Meeter Center at Calvin College (www.calvin.edu). Packed with more information on the HC and its background than anything else I have been able to track down.

What is Distinctive about the Heidelberg Catechism?

There are numerous things which distinguish the HC from, say, the Westminster catechisms, though few of these are really theological. Rather, the primary difference is usually seen to be one of *tone* and *emphasis*. ***The HC is regarded as being more pastoral in its overall approach.*** We can see this clearly in the first and last questions:

Question 1: *What is your only comfort in life and in death?*

Answer: *That I am not my own, but belong, body and soul, in life and death, to my faithful saviour Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood, and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil. He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven; in fact, all things must work together for my salvation. Because I belong to him, Christ, by his Holy Spirit, assures me of eternal life and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now to live for him.*

Question 129: *What does that little word 'Amen' express?*

Answer: *'Amen' means, 'This is sure to be!' It is even more sure that God listens to my prayer, than that I really desire what I pray for.*

The HC thus places comfort or personal assurance, that most Reformation and evangelical of insights, right at the heart of its exposition of the faith.

The History of the HC's Composition

Why the 1560s?

The 1560s was the great era of Protestant confession writing (Scots, Belgic, Second Helvetic, Thirty-Nine Articles etc). This was in the wake of Catholic confessionalisation at the Council of Trent.

Remember: confessions were like political manifestos. They identified the political allegiances of territories and countries.

Why a Catechism?

Catechising (teaching of a form of sound words) seems to have been standard practice from very early in the church's history, with origins in parental instruction of children in OT Israel (Ex. 12:26-27).

Socratic (question-and-answer) catechisms: the first recorded instance is that of Bruno of Wurzburg in 1045.

Medieval catechisms included four basic elements: Apostles' Creed, Decalogue, Lord's Prayer, and Sacraments. Protestants built on this medieval tradition, as in so many other areas, and, by 1563, had produced many examples. E.g., Martin Luther, *Small and Large Catechisms* (1529); Martin Bucer, *Strasbourg Catechism* (1534); *Genevan Catechism* (1541, 1545); Heinrich Bullinger, *Catechism Written for Adults* (1559).

Catechisms thus covered those topics which were considered basic to the Christian life; they were not intended as exhaustive statements on everything.

Why a Catechism at Heidelberg?

Heidelberg was the principal city of the Palatinate, the administrative headquarters of the Elector Palatine, the most important of the seven Electors of the Holy Roman Empire. It is in modern day Germany.

The HRE was the dominant mainland power (alongside the Papacy) in Europe from the rule of Charlemagne in the 9th century. The seven Electors had the right (under the Golden Bull of Charles IV in 1356) of electing the emperor.

Luther's patron, Frederick the Wise, of Wittenberg, was an Elector; this gave him an importance much greater than the military and economic power of Wittenberg might have suggested, and enabled him to protect Luther from the assaults of the Papacy and the Emperor.

The Elector Palatine served as chairman of the Electors and as Vicar of the Emperor.

In 1555, the Emperor Charles V reluctantly signed the Peace of Augsburg. This allowed Luther regions of the empire to continue to be Lutheran.

The Elector Palatine who commissioned the HC was Frederick III. He faced a significant ecumenical issue: he wanted to forge an alliance between the moderate Lutherans, the so-called Phillipists (the followers of Phillip Melancthon) and the Reformed in Heidelberg; and to isolate the hard-line Lutherans, the so-called Gnesio-Lutherans.

This accounts for the *ecumenical* tone of the HC. E.g., there is no direct discussion of predestination, as this would have divided the Reformed and the Phillipists. But *ecumenical* here is not intended in the modern sense: the HC has strong words to say

about the Mass. See Qu. 80 (expanded in the second edition, March 1563, at the specific command of Frederick III).

Frederick also has three specific intentions for the HC. In the *Introduction*, he writes that he was publishing the HC

in order not only that the youth in churches and schools may be piously instructed in such Christian doctrine, and be thoroughly trained therein, but 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.

Here, and elsewhere in the preface, he makes it clear that the HC is to be:

- a catechetical tool for children
- a preaching guide, to help pastors take their people through the major heads of biblical doctrine
- a form for confessional unity

The HC was a team project, but the principal author is undoubtedly the Reformed theologian, Zacharias Ursinus (1534-1583). Tradition also ascribes an important role to another Reformed theologian, Caspar Oelavianus (1536-1587), though scholars generally see his role as considerably less significant than that of Ursinus.

The Structure of the Catechism

Two points of the HC's structure are of particular interest:

The flow of the HC's argument is seen to be threefold:

- Introduction (Qu. 1-2)
- Guilt (Qu. 3-11), outlining the dilemma of fallen humanity.
- Grace (Qu. 12-85), outlining God's action in salvation.
- Gratitude (Qu. 86-129), outlining the appropriate human response to God's saving actions.

The questions are divided among fifty-two Lord's Days. This is to facilitate the annual preaching of all of the major heads of Christian doctrine, something perhaps more relevant today, in an era of biblical and theological illiteracy, than at the time the HC was composed.

The numbering of the questions, and the division into Lord's Days, occurred after the HC was embodied into the Palatinate Church Order in November, 1563.