



Zacharias Ursinus (1534-1583)

Zacharias Ursinus is not one of the most well-known people of the Reformation. Unfortunately, even some who read and hold to the Biblical truths taught in the Heidelberg Catechism do not know that he is one of its authors. This is partly due to the fact that Ursinus would rather have been left alone as a teacher and study theology in some hidden corner of the world. The other reason is that he is part of the second generation of the reformers. With the start of major movements in history, those who start the movement, or are at the beginning of the movement, are the most well-known. Ursinus is down the ladder in time from the beginning of the Reformation. He did not miss the beginning by much; yet he is far enough removed that he is not given much consideration. This is probably just the way he would have wanted it.

His early times

Ursinus was born on July 18, 1534, in Breslau of Silesia, a town in a province of Austria. When Ursinus was born, much had already happened in the Reformation of the church. Ursinus' birth followed the posting of the 95 theses by about seventeen years. The Augsburg Confession was already written (chiefly by one of his later instructors and friends, Philip Melancthon), and King Henry VIII of England had declared his act of Supremacy which broke open the cracks between England, the Pope, and Roman Catholicism. When Ursinus was two years old, John Calvin would publish his first edition of *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*.

The Ursinus family lived within modest means. They were lower middle class in terms of the economics for the family. His father (Casper) was a tutor and, because of his work with their children, he came to know some of the prominent families of the city. This helped him secure a position as head of care for the poor in Breslau. He was also an assistant to Ambrosius Moiban, minister of St. Elisabeth Church in Breslau and one of the city's reformers. It is reported that Ursinus' mother died in 1542 when a plague struck Breslau and killed fifteen percent of the population. Ursinus' grandmother, with whom he lived along with his sister and father, died in 1553 of another plague. In 1554, Ursinus became very sick and had to go to the mountains for recuperation.

The events of the early times of Ursinus' life would have a lasting effect on him and his theology. First, his father was a tutor and, thus, educated. This allowed for Ursinus the beginnings of his education. Second, his father's connections with the prominent families of Breslau allowed Ursinus to go to Wittenberg and study. The city council agreed to pay for his education with the understanding that he would come back and teach in their city. Third, death was a reality of everyday life. What is the one thing a person wants more than anything else when he faces death? Comfort. This may well be why the first question and answer to the *Heidelberg Catechism* is written the way it is when it states:

Question 1. *What is your 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 Savior Jesus Christ; who, with his precious blood, has 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 heartily willing and ready, henceforth, to live unto him.*¹

Death was common in the sixteenth century for young and old alike. Knowing that nothing could separate one from the love of God through Jesus Christ was the best source of comfort a person could receive. The Roman Catholic Church had taught the people that they were outside of salvation if they were not part of her. But in this summary of God's Word, comfort and hope were to be found.

The fourth aspect of his early days related to death was his own sickness. Sickness and infirmity would seem to mark the rest of his life. Later in life, especially while teaching at Sapience College, Ursinus would use his health as a reason not to engage in theological debate or the polemics of the day.

Finally, Ursinus was under the teaching of Moiban, who had written a catechism. Moiban's influence on Ursinus as a youngster was a source for Ursinus' later development of the Heidelberg Catechism. Derk Visser, in his book *Zacharius Ursinus: The Reluctant Reformer*, writes, *Moiban's catechism could easily be a source — even an important one — without being a literary source. In view of the oral method of rote learning — especially of catechetical instruction Ursinus may not have needed Moiban's actual phraseology in front of him.*²

Continuing development

After being taught by Moiban in Breslau, Ursinus was ready for further study; study that would take Ursinus out of his home town of Breslau and into the heart of the Reformation and Lutheranism. Ursinus went to Wittenberg at the age of sixteen. There he would study under Melanchthon. Melanchthon took notice and a lasting friendship was formed between the young student and the older Melanchthon.

Studying at Wittenberg was not a life of ease. Ursinus did not fit in well with the other students. He saw them as rowdy and not serious students. In one of his letters, Ursinus wrote about his displeasure in the *"morals and the way in which the people live among whom I must dwell."*³ While studying at Wittenberg, Ursinus had work to do on behalf of the Breslau City Council as a part of the agreement for paying for his education. He had to tutor Eleasar Schlaher, a son of a mine owner in Wittenberg with ties to the aristocracy of Breslau. While being optimistic of the tutoring opportunity, Ursinus found Eleasar to be of mediocre ability and more fond of entertainment than that of study. After three years of working with Eleasar and numerous letters to Johann Crato (the medical doctor to the city of Breslau and one of the men of Breslau who helped Ursinus receive payment for his schooling), Ursinus was able to convince Eleasar 's father that his son should study business.

Not only did Johann Crato help Ursinus get the funding he needed to attend the University at Wittenberg, he often wrote Ursinus asking him about theological issues of the day. This was the start of a friendship that would last the rest of their lives. Crato's interest in theology began when he had studied under Martin Luther. Luther had recommended to Crato that he become a doctor. This was a very important change in Crato's life, and also for the development of the Reformed Faith in the Palatinate. Crato would later leave his position as Doctor of Breslau and become personal physician to emperors Ferdinand I and Maximilian II. In this position he would be part of the court, enabling him to influence the emperor when it came to theological positions.

The biggest impact of these seven years of the continuing education of Ursinus was not only that of studying under Melanchthon, but also being witness to the turmoil that went with theology at that time. Ursinus was a proficient student in many areas of study and took his studies very seriously. Ursinus lived with Melanchthon while studying and would learn much from his teacher. He would also deviate from Lutheranism on some points that would later be developed into the Reformed Faith.

Ursinus would also witness firsthand the attacks of the Flacians against Melanchthon. They were attacks by Lutherans against Lutherans — those who were their brothers in the Lord. In the first generation of the Reformation there had been a time of quiet when Lutherans had to stick together

against the Roman Catholics. When this was complete and the peace of Augsburg was set in place, the attacks against Melanchthon and his agreement with Calvin was at their highest.

In those days, no holds were barred in theological discussions. The polemics of the day were often personal. To knock down the character of a person was just as important as winning the theological point. Visser wrote, *"Melanchthon felt the Flacians were less concerned with doctrine than with defeating Melanchthon, either to keep him in their camp or to have him isolated as a heretic."*⁴ These attacks shaped Ursinus to the point where he never wanted to be in the spotlight. Visser believes that, *"The real significance of Ursinus' interest in these attacks on Melanchthon is the obvious fact that they exposed him to the variety of interpretations, to the nature of controversy, and to the methods of opponents."*⁵

After studying with Melanchthon for seven years, he went with him to a conference in Worms. Following the conference was a trip that would take Ursinus to the major centres of Reformation learning and the best of budding Reformed scholars. The trip took almost a year to complete. He went to Heidelberg, Strasburg, Basel, Lausanne, and Geneva. Ursinus received from Calvin a set of his signed works as a gift. He later passed through Lyons and Orleans. He stopped in Paris where he studied French and Hebrew. The last stop on his journey was to Zurich, Switzerland, where he became friends with such great Reformed theologians as Bullinger and Peter Martyr.

Back to Breslau: the turning point

In the fall of 1558, Breslau called for Ursinus to fulfil his duty to the city. After over seven years of training, it was time for him to go to work for his benefactors. The debates in Breslau about Lutheranism and the new Reformed teachings, however, were hot. It was back in his hometown where a turning point began into which path of theology Ursinus was going to travel.

Would he follow his growing convictions as taught by his teacher Melanchthon and reaffirmed in his recent travels, or would he fall to the pressures of those in Breslau and others out of a sense of duty to a city that had paid for his education? Which would he stand for — avoidance of confrontation (which he hated), or conscience and his belief in what the Bible taught? Ursinus began teaching at the St. Elisabeth School — the same school where he was taught in his younger years. The student had returned as the teacher. He started by teaching Melanchthon's catechism in short, concise statements — these were Ursinus' *Theses of 1558*.

The Gnesio-Lutherans within the city soon began to gossip about Ursinus and his teachings, believing him to be sympathetic to Melanchthon's teachings. Ursinus stopped partaking of the Lord's Supper in the church as well. Visser states, One can safely assume it was the ceremonies of mass that stirred Ursinus' conscience and that made him examine the Scriptures and Fathers and finally decide to abstain from communion. Then to avoid being drawn into the controversies, he asked for a leave of absence to continue his studies.⁶

The leave of absence was granted. With some money provided by Crato, he left Breslau in April, 1560. Ursinus wrote his uncle:

*"I am well content to leave my country when it will not tolerate the confession of truth which I cannot in good conscience give up. If my excellent teacher Philip were still alive, I would go to him. But since he is dead, my mind is made up to turn to the Zurichers, who are in no great credit here, but whose fame stands so high with other churches that it cannot be obscured by our preachers. They are pious, learned, great men in whose company I am inclined henceforth to spend my life. As regards the rest, God will provide."*⁷

Ursinus visited the Swiss reformers rather than another German city. He would have been content to stay with them and study with them. The theological path seems to be settled, but his destination was unsettled. The last line of his letter to his uncle seems to be prophetic, *"As regards the rest, God will provide."*

The call to Heidelberg

Ursinus arrived in Zurich in October of 1569. Ursinus' time in Zurich was short (about a year), but he made the most of his time there by studying under Peter Martyr and reading extensively. It appears that Martyr continued the refinement of Ursinus' theology that began under the direction of Melancthon.

During this time, conditions were volatile in the Palatinate. Frederick III wanted to continue to reform the churches of his region. His predecessor, Otto-Henry, was unable to accomplish reformation because of political pressures; but the peace of Augsburg had become firmly established. Was it possible for another set of beliefs be put into play? The peace of Augsburg only recognized Lutheran and Catholic beliefs, but what of those who wanted to become something else?

Frederick III was filling the pulpits and positions with those of the Reformed persuasion. He did this by looking outside the Palatinate, bringing in international preachers and teachers. Frederick's intention was to show that the change that was taking place within the Palatinate was not just a schismatic group within Germany, but that it stretched beyond the borders of Germany. It also gave some political cover for the movement because the Lutheran princes of Germany would not want to deal with all the different countries, regions, and cities that the preachers and teachers represented.

Frederick III also wanted some of the best theologians of the day. He first called Peter Martyr back to the Palatinate. Martyr was raised in the Palatinate and also had given advice to Frederick's predecessor, Otto-Henry. Martyr thought of himself too old to start a new work and recommended the twenty-seven year-old Ursinus to take up the cause and work in Heidelberg.

Ursinus received the call to go to Heidelberg. This would mean that he would have to go back to Germany — the place he had just left so he would not be part of a controversy. He realized the theological ground he stood upon would be attacked from all sides. The attacks in those days that were often hurled at him were two-fold: *ad hominem* — trying to bring down the person, or they would try to associate the person with an extreme segment of the movement — guilt by association, even if that association was ever so small. These were the attacks his beloved teacher, Melancthon, went through, and if he went to Heidelberg, this is what he would have to face — not from within Heidelberg itself, but by Lutherans in other German regions.

Ursinus was well aware of this as he wrote, *"Oh that I could remain hidden in a corner. I would give anything for shelter in some quiet village."*⁸ Knowing he would receive critique and questioning of his work made Ursinus search the Scriptures all the more diligently for the best answer. He was a Berean (Acts 17:11). The polemics of the time did not suit him. Knowing all this, he still accepted the call of Frederick the Pious to go to Heidelberg.

In September of 1561, Ursinus arrived in Heidelberg. By the spring of 1562, he was doing some preaching and some teaching at Sapience College, a seminary that was set up by the elector to train men as pastors for the Palatinate. This would be the place where Frederick III would have his theologian work. The calling that Ursinus would fill would be the head of Sapience College, the "The College of Wisdom."

A teacher and schoolmaster

Ursinus worked diligently as a teacher and took his work very seriously. He could do no other. When asked a question by his students, he would not directly answer them. Instead, he would go back to his study and find the best possible answer for the question posed to him by his students, and then answer them the next day. He was meticulous in his work and busy beyond belief. He did not like to be disturbed while in his study. Ursinus had a sign hanging over the door of his study which said, *"Friend who enters here, be short or go or help me with my work."*⁹ This best described the theological drive of Ursinus.

During his years as head of Sapience College, Ursinus was often in ill health. His work was burdensome, and he was over worked. Ursinus would use this to his advantage. Crato, who had become Ursinus' friend, would often want Ursinus' opinion on theological matters that were being discussed in court. Ursinus would use his health and his labors as excuses for not answering. Ursinus remembered the polemics of his younger years and did not want to be a part of it. In one letter he wrote Crato, "*I am glad God did not place me to deal with those great affairs.*"¹⁰

One of the few instances where Ursinus had to be involved in a public theological dispute was at the *Maulbronn Colloquy*. Fredrick had been called to give an account of the theology of the Palatinate by his fellow princes of Germany. The conference took place in April 1564 and lasted for a week. Each side had a number of theologians. The main antagonists were Ursinus and the Gnesio-Lutheran, Jacob Andreae. Andreae became a persistent foe for Ursinus in the years to come. The proceedings were to be private, but the Gnesio-Lutherans published their view of the minutes and further debate and writings would ensue.

The Heidelberg Catechism

Soon after arriving in Heidelberg, Ursinus was called upon with Casper Olevianus, the court preacher for Fredrick III as well as preacher for the Church of the Holy Ghost, to write a document that would be used as a tool to bring the beliefs of the Palatinate together. It would be written especially for the teaching of the children of the region. It would contain the doctrines of what would become a new faith in a world that only had two at the time (Catholic and Lutheran).

Fredrick was looking for a document that could bring unity to the Palatinate and leaned on these two men to do it. What could have been a better choice than these two: an elegant preacher of the Word who was known to move the hearts of men, and a pious, quiet teacher of great understanding.

1. The making

Each of the two men went to work on his own to see what they would come up with as an outline for the new catechism. Olevianus had written a tract on the Covenant of Grace, and Ursinus had already written a larger and smaller catechism. These previous writings were to be the foundation for the Heidelberg Catechism. Based on these previous writings, the *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism* was compiled after the death of Ursinus by one of his students, David Pareus. Pareus used his class notes to publish the *Commentary*. While Olevianus had a great part in the writing of the *Heidelberg Catechism*, it is primarily a work of Ursinus.

The writing the catechism took nearly a year to complete. This new catechism was different from many of the documents that were being written at the time. Fredrick had insisted that the writers use proof texts for answers so as to protect the document as Biblical. This document was also very personal; that is, for the believer. It used words like "we" and "I" to describe the faith of the catechumen in relation to God.

After it was complete, Fredrick called ministers and teachers in the Palatinate to study the new document. Several noted that the new catechism reminded them of the book of Romans. The meeting lasted eight days and the document was unanimously approved by the attendees.

The morning after it was approved by the attendees, Fredrick III wrote a 830-word introduction to the document and sealed it with his seal. Whether to protect the integrity of the document or of the men who wrote it, the *Heidelberg Catechism* was presented as a committee document under the auspices of Fredrick III. The only changes made to the Heidelberg Catechism were made by Fredrick himself.

In the second edition, Frederick ordered Question and Answer 80 to be added, though without the sharp language concerning the mass; but when the attacks of Roman Catholics increased in bitterness and intensity, Frederick made another change in this same question and answer which included the words which have ever afterward vexed the souls of Roman Catholics, words which

branded the mass as "*an accursed idolatry*." Frederick also ordered that it be divided into fifty-two sections, or Lord's Days, so that it could be preached from beginning to end in one year.¹¹

The new catechism was Frederick's document, but the theologians would have to defend it.

2. The defending

The Heidelberg Catechism did not remain only in the Palatinate. Frederick sent copies to the other princes of Germany and abroad. The document that was meant to bring unity for the Palatinate would bring unwanted strife for its chief author. What took him one year to write would need defending for the rest of his life.

The attacks came fast and furious, curiously enough not as much from the Catholics, but from the German Lutherans. Many articles and tracts were written about the catechism. One of main documents that Ursinus wrote concerning this controversy was *True Doctrine of the Sacred Supper of Jesus Christ*. Ursinus felt that, *The Lutherans' errors ... derived from insufficient knowledge of the doctrine of the sacraments, from an incorrect reading of the Heidelberg theology, and from too great a reliance on the reputation of men*.¹²

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a) The Lord's Supper

The main objection against the Heidelberg Catechism centered on the physical presence of Christ at the Lord's Supper. Illyricus Flacius had nine points of contention with the Heidelberg Catechism, eight of which concerned the Lord's Supper. The Lutheran position was that Christ is physically present at the Lord's Supper, but not in the elements themselves. The position that Ursinus and the Catechism took was that Christ is present at the Lord's Supper, but only spiritually and not physically. The Lutherans felt that Christ was being taken out of the Lord's Supper.

Religious war was in full bloom in Germany, and it was over the same subject that had been the battle with the Catholics, only with a different twist; the question being — how is Christ present at the Lord's Supper?

b) Ubiquity

A related topic to the presence of Christ at the Lord's Supper was ubiquity. Where is Christ physically? Olevianus described Andreae's (a Lutheran) position as, "*Christ sits on God's right. God's right is everywhere. Thus Christ's humanity is everywhere*."¹³ This tactic was used to get the physical presence of Christ at the Lord's Supper. Using that same argument, one could say that God's left is everywhere, and since God puts the unbeliever on His left at judgment day, we all must be unbelievers. The argument by Andreae was shown to be ludicrous and a prime example of why Ursinus did not want any part of the polemics of his day.

Ursinus' explanation of the matter was, "*that Christ's divine nature is eternal and everywhere, whereas His human nature is finite and local, and once in heaven it remained there*."¹⁴ Ursinus also used the doctrine of the Trinity in his *Confession* as a response to Andreae on both subjects of the Lord's Supper and Ubiquity.

After the Heidelberg Catechism

The high point of Ursinus' career was the *Heidelberg Catechism*. While teaching at Sapience College, Ursinus became the defender of the catechism. This took its toll on one who already had

health issues. By 1566, Ursinus' writing had dramatically decreased. Two years later, he gave up his chair at Sapience College, but continued to teach. Fredrick III asked for Ursinus' advice on what to do with church discipline and the setting up of presbyteries. Ursinus spoke in favor of each and his argumentation ruled the day. While in Heidelberg in late 1573, he married Margaretha Troutwein. Their marriage would not be long (about nine years). They had one son.

In 1576, Fredrick the Pious died and a change came to the Palatinate. Fredrick's son, Louis, took his father's place. Louis was an ardent Lutheran even though he was instructed by his father to let the Reformed faith live on. He did not heed his father and within a year, six hundred positions were taken away from the Reformed and given to Lutheran pastors and teachers.

Ursinus set up a school at Neustadt, Germany. Fredrick's second son, Casimir, ruled in this territory. In the year of Ursinus' death (March 6, 1583), Casimir came to rule in the Palatinate when his brother, Louis, died. At that time the Reformed faith was re-established in the Palatinate.

Ursinus' contribution

Within many Reformed traditions, the *Heidelberg Catechism* is considered the crown jewel of its confession. I have met with many dying saints who spoke of Jesus as their only comfort in life and death. It is a confession that is still preached regularly, even weekly, in some denominations. One wonders if Ursinus realized the impact that this confession would have on the lives of thousands upon thousands of people throughout the following centuries. Certainly, the hand of God was at work using men to develop His church and her doctrines.

Ursinus' work on the *Heidelberg Catechism* has stood the test of time. It is a document for the church, but, more importantly, for her people. It is a very personal confession. It is unfortunate that many who have this as part of their church history do not understand the document and what it truly means. Some just see it as antiquated and fail to comprehend the deep truths that are contained within it. Ursinus and Olevianus were used by God to produce a biblical masterpiece for the Reformed faith.

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¹ *Ecumenical and Reformed Creeds and Confessions, Classroom Edition*, (1991). Dyer, Mid-America Reformed Seminary, p. 37.

² *Zacharias Ursinus: The Reluctant Reformer*, (1983). Derk Visser. New York, United Church Press, p. 35.

³ Ibid, pp. 54-55.

⁴ Ibid, p. 55.

⁵ Ibid, p. 56.

⁶ Ibid, p. 91.

⁷ *Three Men Came to Heidelberg*, (1963). Thea B. Van Halsema. Grand Rapids, Christian Reformed Publishing House, p. 15.

⁸ *Portraits of Faithful Saints*, (1999). Herman Hanko. Grandville, Reformed Free Publishing Association, p. 204.

⁹ *Three Men Came to Heidelberg*, (1963). Thea B. Van Halsema. Grand Rapids, Christian Reformed Publishing House, p. 23.

¹⁰ *Zacharias Ursinus: The Reluctant Reformer*, (1983). Derk Visser. New York, United Church Press, p. 160.

¹¹ *Portraits of Faithful Saints*, (1999). Herman Hanko. Grandville, Reformed Free Publishing Association, p. 205.

¹² *Zacharias Ursinus: The Reluctant Reformer*, (1983). Derk Visser. New York, United Church Press, p. 135.

¹³ Ibid, p. 139.

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 139.