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THE CHURCH'S BOOK OF COMFORT

The Church's Book of Comfort

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CONTENTS

Preface	vii
CHAPTER 1	
The Reformation in Germany — <i>Christa Boerke</i>	1
CHAPTER 2	
The Completion of the Heidelberg Catechism — <i>Wim Verboom</i> . . .	27
CHAPTER 3	
The People Behind the Heidelberg Catechism — <i>Christa Boerke</i> . . .	62
CHAPTER 4	
The Theology of the Heidelberg Catechism — <i>Willem van 't Spijker</i>	89
CHAPTER 5	
The Heidelberg Catechism in the Netherlands	
A. Catechism Teaching from the Late Middle Ages — <i>Wim Verboom</i>	129
B. Ecclesiastical Recognition of the Catechism — <i>Téunis M. Hofman</i>	147
CHAPTER 6	
The Heidelberg Catechism in Preaching and Teaching	
A. The Catechism in Preaching — <i>Willem Jan op 't Hof</i>	187
B. The Catechism in Church Education — <i>Marinus Golverdingen</i>	211
CHAPTER 7	
The Continued Relevance of the Heidelberg Catechism — <i>Willem van 't Spijker</i>	251
Bibliography	273
Name Index	285
Place Index	289
Contributors	293

PREFACE

Much has been written about the Heidelberg Catechism. The references in this book comprise only a fraction of the bibliography that could be assembled for this classic document, and numerous studies on this catechism will continue to appear in the future. This is a normal development for works in church history that survive the centuries, because they capture a bit of eternity itself. Such is indeed the case with the best-known document of the Reformed tradition. The Heidelberg Catechism owes its “eternal youth” (G. Oorthuys) to the fundamental way it interprets the truth of the gospel, as rediscovered by the Reformation. This new publication brings these features to light.

Although the Catechism can be called a classic document, it is not detached from history. Those who ignore the historical context of this confessional statement will not recognize its special character. For this reason, the first three chapters are devoted to the history of this particular catechism.

Drs. Christa Th. Boerke describes the church and historical events that took place against the background of the Reformation in Germany during the period that preceded the emergence of the Heidelberg Catechism. The German Reformation had a particularly Lutheran character until changes were initiated by Elector Frederick the Wise.

Dr. Wim Verboom addresses the history of the production of the Heidelberg Catechism itself. The history of the Palatinate is traced along political and cultural lines. He describes the antecedents and compilation of this document in a way that makes clear how decisive the choice between Lutheranism and Reformed Protestantism really was.

In the third chapter, Drs. Christa Th. Boerke provides biographical sketches of the people involved in the compilation and publication of the Catechism. Ursinus and Olevianus receive most of the attention, but other participants from Heidelberg University, the consistory, and the government are also included. Thus, we see the varied environment in which the document came to light. This diversity became a hallmark of the Reformed tradition without detracting from its unity.

Dr. Willem van 't Spijker summarizes the theological dimensions of the Catechism. He finds essential agreement in thought and experience with the position that Luther held at the beginning of the Reformation. The classic Reformed formulation of this confession agrees perfectly with the heart of

the gospel. The emphasis on communion with Christ is typical. Only in this union with Christ do we partake of salvation, know our misery, experience redemption, and express our gratitude through obedience and prayer.

In the fifth chapter, Dr. Wim Verboom describes the condition of catechetical instruction in the late Middle Ages, revealing the extent to which the Reformation signified a change in religious instruction. Prior to this time, the teaching of the faith was not particularly well established. The catechisms that emerged within the orbit of the Reformation prior to the Heidelberg version reflected a different approach by offering more structured teaching.

Next, Dr. Teunis M. Hofman briefly sketches the history of the Reformation in the Low Countries, describing the background in which the ecclesiastical recognition of the Catechism took place. Official church meetings are ascribed a significant role in this narrative. The evaluation and approval of the Catechism took place over the period from the Convent of Wezel (1568) to the great Synod of Dort (1618–1619). Resistance from the Remonstrants led to a powerful ecclesiastical confirmation of this book of instruction and to its use as a confessional statement of the Reformed Church in the Netherlands.

Preaching and catechetical instruction both functioned as means whereby the content of Reformed doctrine was disseminated. Dr. Willem Jan op 't Hof casts light on the practice of preaching the Catechism in the centuries following the Reformation. He also discusses the significance and circulation of collections of sermons over a period of more than two centuries, from 1576 to 1801. Drs. Marinus Golverdingen focuses on the curriculum and pedagogical principles furnished by the Synod of Dort. He provides an overview of the catechetical instruction material of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and describes a few short instruction books popular in those days. Catechism preaching and teaching received only scant attention in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. To date, very little research has been devoted to this topic.

In the last chapter, a comparison is made with two other confessional statements of the Reformed tradition, namely, the Belgic Confession of Faith and the Canons of Dort. Catechisms of other countries are also compared. The continuing relevance of the Heidelberg Catechism is due principally to the marriage of biblical doctrine and Christian living. An element of great significance in this regard is the ever-present exhortation to focus on the reality of faith. Truth is not only *taught*; it is also *experienced* in terms of the comfort it bestows. Today's generation would greatly benefit from putting into Christian practice the heritage of the Reformation contained in this Catechism.

This book is enriched with many illustrations, most of which derive from old printed sources acknowledged in the captions. Most of these illustrations belong to the photographic archive of the Dutch edition of this volume, Den Hertog, Houten, the Netherlands. In addition, we gratefully acknowledge material obtained from the Bibliotheca Palatina, the Museum of the Electorate of the Palatinate, the Municipal Archives of Heidelberg, and the Theological School of Rotterdam. The illustrations not only make the book more attractive but also help clarify the text. The same is true of the descriptive material placed in boxes, which constitutes source material as well as illustrations. Although the references to source material and literature constitute only a selection, the book reflects the knowledge and insight of the authors based on a broad range of scholarly work pertaining to the Heidelberg Catechism.

This publication saw the light of day not only because of the collaboration of the authors, but also because of the commitment of Dr. J. Versloot and the publisher, Den Hertog of Houten. We thank all those who contributed to the completion of this work.

Apeldoorn, September 12, 2005

Willem van 't Spijker

Preface to the English Translation

The Heidelberg Catechism is part of the international, confessional heritage of Reformed Protestantism. Its formulation and adoption in the Palatinate under the leadership of Elector Frederick the Pious—as he was known—reflected this prince's personal preference for the Reformed confession. It was his desire that this personal conviction would also be commonly held within the political boundaries of his territory and recognized within the broader framework of the European commonwealth. His book of instruction thus acquired a confessional luster that it has never lost. Through its unique approach the Heidelberg Catechism has attained important and lasting significance within Reformed and Presbyterian Christianity worldwide.

From the beginning it was clear that this book of instruction would also become a statement of confession. The church order of the Palatinate originally placed it between the Forms of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Infant baptism is followed by ecclesiastical instruction in the *doctrine* of the confessing church. This instruction culminates in discipleship: through profession of faith one subjects oneself to ecclesiastical *discipline*. This approach gives structure to the confessing church—marked by the Lord's Supper—in

seeking to consist of disciples of the Great Master. The content of the Heidelberg Catechism mirrors this objective. It reveals to some extent the model of the church pursued by Martin Bucer and John Calvin, reflecting an inner strength capable of enduring protracted episodes of particular hardship.

This does not mean, however, that the Heidelberg Catechism seeks preeminence within the Reformed and Presbyterian community. It is the essence of Reformed Protestantism to encompass rich diversity and variation. This has been the case ever since the beginning of the sixteenth century and reflects the ecumenical nature of Reformed Protestantism. Lutherans succeeded in publishing a *Konkordienbuch* (Book of Concord) towards the end of the sixteenth century, capturing the unity of Lutheranism. Similar attempts to achieve the unity of the European Reformed have never gotten beyond the publication of a *Harmonia Confessionum* in Genève in 1581. It presented the content of a large number of Reformed confessions, which demonstrated that despite remarkable diversity there was essential agreement and harmony.

In this way the Heidelberg Catechism has succeeded in playing its role to the fullest extent, as is illustrated by the publication of *Reformed Confessions Harmonized* (edited by Joel R. Beeke and Sinclair B. Ferguson, 1999). Historical antecedents, theological methods, pedagogical objectives, and decisive events can and may contribute to diversity without detracting from underlying unanimity. The fact that in his books of instruction (1537, 1545) Calvin clearly emphasized the need to know and acknowledge God, and thus to glorify Him, does not contradict the need for Christian comfort that the Heidelberg Catechism expounds in its opening question. Neither does the Heidelberg Catechism in any way detract from the glorification of God and the celebration of perfect joy in God, as Westminster Shorter Catechism Q&A 1 stresses. After all, no knowledge of God is possible if it is not imparted to us by the Lord Jesus Christ—through the great Comforter—in whom all wisdom and knowledge are guaranteed. To know Him constitutes eternal life. Practicing communion of faith with Him prefigures the eternal joy of being comforted in knowing God as we have been known by Him.

Thanks to everyone who made an English version of this book possible. We are especially indebted to Lawrence Bilkes (who was so instrumental in making this English translation possible), Gerrit Bilkes (for his fine translation of the book), and Jerry Bilkes (for his suggestions and insights in the translation process). Gratitude is also expressed for the editorial labors of Joel R. Beeke and those helping him at Reformation Heritage Books.

Apeldoorn, January 16, 2009

Willem van 't Spijker

CHAPTER 7

The Continued Relevance of the Heidelberg Catechism

by Willem van 't Spijker

Place and significance

There are few catechisms of the same era as the Heidelberg Catechism that do not reveal evidence of kinship. It is worthwhile to place these documents side by side for a clearer understanding of the character of the Heidelberg Catechism.

Ursinus had connections with Wittenberg, especially with Melanchthon. He had studied with the latter, and in his own teaching in Heidelberg he used the *Loci communes* written by this “teacher from Germany.” The textbook that Melanchthon wrote for the training and appointment of ministers was employed by Ursinus as the basis of his lectures. This is obvious from the edition of these lectures published by Ursinus’s student, Quirinus Reuter. Melanchthon’s influence can be recognized in the definitions that Ursinus presents in his Larger Catechism. We also trace Melanchthon’s thinking in Ursinus’s description of the relationship between the law and the gospel. The same is true of Ursinus’s development of the doctrine of the covenant. According to his thinking, the covenant of nature is connected with the image of God. It became the prototype for the covenant of works and would play an important role in the subsequent development of the overall doctrine of the covenant within Reformed theology. Ursinus’s view of the covenant was shared to some extent by all theologians who encountered Anabaptists in their immediate vicinity. This is how the Reformed doctrine of the covenant was born.

In Basel, Oecolampadius employed the concept of the covenant early on to emphasize the unity of the old and new covenants. The same was true in Strasbourg, where Bucer similarly utilized the theology of the covenant in the conflict with Anabaptists. In Zurich, it was Bullinger especially who had to defend Zwingli’s heritage and who augmented Zwingli’s view on the covenant of grace. Ursinus maintained close contacts with prominent Reformed theologians in Zurich. In the formulation of the Heidelberg Catechism he must certainly have used the catechetical material that had been produced there.

The works of Bullinger himself should also be mentioned here: his *Summa Christlicher Religion* (1556) and his *Catechesis pro adultioribus scripta* (Catechism for Young Adults, 1559). Bullinger knew how to write for ordinary people. However, when compared with the Heidelberg Catechism, his works have a closer affinity with theological works. This probably explains Bullinger's enthusiasm expressed in a letter to Olevianus, in which he praised the qualities of the work of Ursinus and Olevianus: "I have read with great eagerness the Catechism that was produced with the encouragement of the eminent Elector Frederick III of the Palatinate, and while reading it I sincerely thanked God, who initiated and prospered this work. The structure of this book is clear, its content pure truth; everything is very easy to follow, devout and effective. In succinct conciseness it contains the fullness of the most important doctrines. I consider it to be the best catechism that has ever been published. Thanks be to God! May He crown it with His blessing." In terms of form and content, this book of instruction was indeed more accessible, less theologically oriented, and more focused on the immediate benefit of doctrine than Bullinger's work.

Bullinger's colleague, Leo Jud, produced a Short Catechism (1541) that is frequently identified as one of the sources of Ursinus's work. Here, too, the concept of the covenant stands out, without dominating the work. Jud's catechism is an example of the influence of the early Reformation centered in Strasbourg and Basel. The Strasbourg catechisms by Matthias Zell, Martin Bucer, and Wolfgang Capito resurface in some respects in Jud's work. Their practical orientation stands out. The question of the benefit of faith supersedes that of rational insight. Doctrines are presented not so much from a theoretical point of view as from the perspective of their significance for living out one's faith and their importance for ethics. The Heidelberg Catechism has a similar focus. The books of instruction that were used in Strasbourg stand out in terms of their attention to the significance of the church with its ministry, mandate, and discipline. A similar approach was taken in Heidelberg, possibly reinforced by the example of Geneva.

Besides Zurich, Geneva deserves attention. With their catechisms, Calvin and Beza provided material that was liberally used by Ursinus. Calvin produced a catechism in 1537 that could be seen as a summary of his *Institutes*, published in Basel in 1536, and viewed by many as a catechism. Subsequently, in 1543, Calvin published an instruction book written in French, translated by himself into Latin in 1545; it was dedicated to the church of Emden. This work may be thought of as a direct source for the Heidelberg Catechism. Calvin's influence is clearly apparent in the Heidelberg Catechism, not only in

direct citations but also through the spirit that it breathes: clarity, godliness, and usefulness for living in God's presence. The two catechisms produced by Calvin's successor, Theodore Beza (1559), undoubtedly also influenced the compilation of the Heidelberg Catechism. Their focus on the instruction of young people stands out, as does a witnessing, confessing, and evangelizing emphasis. Geneva's influence on the Heidelberg Catechism is apparent in its view of the Lord's Supper, in beliefs concerning Christ, and no less in its preferred ecclesiastical system—thus clearing a path for the church order of the Palatinate. Olevianus was especially involved in the establishment of this church order. One must look hard to find his influence in these aspects of the Heidelberg Catechism. Ecclesiastical discipline, which in Lord's Day 31 is discussed in connection with the Lord's Supper, was patterned after the Genevan model, not that of Zurich. A comparison with the work *Der Gnadenbund Gottes* (God's Covenant of Grace), which largely accounts for Olevianus's renown, does not yield anything of substance. The latter work does treat the concept of the covenant in great depth.

In this respect, the Catechism is considerably more sober, which constitutes one of its real strengths. Out of the wealth of Reformational material, the Heidelberg Catechism brings together elements of great value, thus linking a number of traditions. Given its experiential orientation, it focuses on the way people might seek and find the source of all comfort. Through the application of the threefold principle of misery, deliverance, and gratitude, it succeeds in establishing a link between theological content and practical godliness, focusing on the experience of faith. This godliness does not emanate from a theology based on the experience of the human heart. It is derived directly from God's revelation of salvation in Christ as found in Scripture. Scripture is allowed to speak for itself, as the references clearly demonstrate. This is ultimately where the power of the Catechism must be sought, as a confession of faith, in the midst of other confessional statements.

The Catechism and the Belgic Confession of Faith

A comparison of the Catechism with the two other confessional statements of churches in the Netherlands is eminently appropriate. It is noteworthy that these churches adopted the Heidelberg Catechism and the Belgic Confession of Faith practically from the very beginning, together with the Geneva Catechism and the French Confession of Faith. Apparently, it was recognized that the Heidelberg Catechism did not differ in essence from that of Geneva. This early choice also demonstrated that, as far as its theological content was concerned, there was no major conflict between the Belgic Confession of



Edition of the Belgic Confession of Faith, adopted as a confessional statement by the Synod of Dort

Faith and the Catechism. The Geneva Catechism eventually made way for the Heidelberg Catechism, in part because the Walloon churches followed the French churches in adopting their Confession of Faith along with Calvin's catechism. The Catechism of the Palatinate and the Belgic Confession of Faith remained the chief confessional statements of the churches of the Netherlands. Despite the essential similarity of these two confessional statements, there are also striking differences. There is, first of all, the role played by the immediate context. Even though the Heidelberg Catechism soon encountered resistance from Lutheran theologians, it was born in a situation of relative peace. In contrast, the Belgic Confession of Faith (1561) emerged in a painful struggle for freedom and independence from an enemy that sought to suppress the church by fire and sword. The fallout from this experience can be recognized in the language of this confessional statement. Guido de Brès, who composed this document, was a martyr. Its final article shows traces of oppression and persecution. Similarly, the articles on the true and false church betray a position of tremendous pressure.

We notice a second difference in the primary purpose of these documents. The Catechism was not primarily meant for the world beyond the church. Its pedagogical aim was principally the upbringing and instruction of the rising generation in the church. Its purpose, therefore, was largely found within

the church itself. Presentation to the outside world was an incidental factor, to make a case for the Reformation within the empire. On the other hand, the Belgic Confession of Faith had an apologetic, defensive purpose. It was concerned with presenting information to the outside world, with the goal of removing prejudice. False religion had to be eradicated, which was the responsibility of the government. But the government first had to be adequately informed about the differences between true and false religion—that is, between the false church and the true church of Christ. Like the French and Scottish confessions, the Belgic Confession emerged at a time of persecution and great distress when people testified to the hope that was within them.

A third difference lies in the method. Aside from a catechism's question-and-answer format, we recognize a difference in style in comparison with the Belgic Confession. Although the Catechism focuses on simplicity, edification, usefulness, and comfort, it cannot be denied that its questions reflect a very clear theology that is elaborated in lucid and understandable answers. Its structure is different from that of the Belgic Confession, which reveals a purely theological approach that is apparent from the sequence of its articles, from the doctrine of God to the perspective of eschatology. In the doctrine of God, it is noteworthy that knowledge of God is twofold. Although creation and Scripture are definitely not equivalent in revealing God, each takes its own approach. The former removes all innocence on the part of mankind, whereas the latter reveals to us the Triune God in accordance with Holy Scripture, coupled with stirrings that we sense within our hearts. Scripture and the doctrine of inspiration are explicitly discussed in the Belgic Confession of Faith, but the Catechism does not contain a specific exposition of Scripture *per se*. Whereas the Catechism is quite succinct in dealing with predestination, the Belgic Confession of Faith devotes an entire article to it. Concerning Christology, the Belgic Confession definitely does not ignore the element of confidence but reminds us that no one loves us more than Jesus Christ. It is precisely here that we find a striking connection between our justification, including the role of faith, and sanctification. Everything follows from the atonement achieved by Christ. When it comes to the church, the Catechism is pertinent but concise, whereas the Belgic Confession discusses the church in considerable detail.

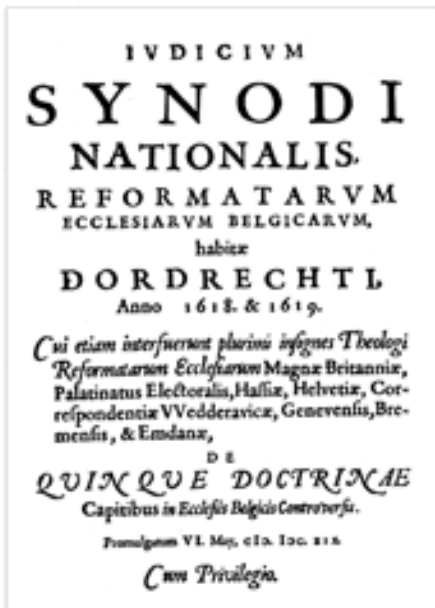
In short, there is a close correspondence between the two statements in terms of content, despite the differences in method. The Catechism is primarily a pedagogical tool, whereas the Belgic Confession has a more theological focus. Perhaps this explains why the Catechism tends to overshadow the Confession in terms of usage and appreciation. With the Belgic Confes-

sion of Faith, churches consciously share the Reformed tradition. Despite its clarity, the Catechism manifests a greater openness, which was clearly intended on the part of its compilers. The Catechism's geographic range of dissemination was considerably greater than that of the Belgic Confession, and the Catechism achieved a far greater radius of influence.

The Catechism and the Canons of Dort

A comparison of the Heidelberg Catechism with the Canons of Dort (1619) calls for a different perspective and leads to a different conclusion. In a sense, one could say that the Canons of Dort constitute a long, drawn-out response to criticism voiced by Remonstrants at that time, in part concerning certain points made by the Catechism. Their objections primarily concerned the total depravity of man in terms of sin and guilt. They also objected to the view that even the holiest of people, as long as they remained in this life, only exhibited a mere beginning of the new obedience. In short, they ascribed greater capabilities to man than the Catechism did.

In terms of content, there is no difference between the two confessional documents. Even when it comes to predestination by grace, one cannot speak of profound differences. The conciseness with which the Catechism discusses predestination is no reason to deduce a difference of view. An instruction book for people of all ages cannot contain the same material and follow the



The convictions of the Synod of Dort with respect to the Canons of Dort

David Pareus was an irenical theologian. In 1598 he became professor of theology in Heidelberg. A student of Ursinus's, he produced in accordance with the lectures of Ursinus the latter's commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism.



same structure as a theological tract such as the Canons of Dort. One might say that the article of the Belgic Confession of Faith that deals with eternal election by God (article 16) was significantly expanded in the Canons. It can now be studied from many different perspectives. At the same time, one can benefit from the many practical and experiential references contained in the Canons. It is very evident that the Canons of Dort emerged at a specific point in the history of Reformed theology. In some sense, one can discern a direct link between Geneva and Dort as far as predestination is concerned. Among the delegates at the Synod of Dort of 1618–1619, one can recognize supporters of both the Canons and the Catechism. In content, their views were largely identical. The rejection of Remonstrantism was lucid and clear because the essence of the Reformation was at stake. When the Catechism was produced, this was definitely not yet the case. Within the Reformed tradition of those earlier days, there were indeed some variations of views that could make a subsequent parting of ways understandable. But given this situation, the Catechism took a clearly recognizable stand, reflecting positions taken by Luther, Bucer, and Calvin. Lutherans subsequently abandoned, to some extent, the views of their great leader. The belief on the part of the Remonstrants that they could appeal to Melancthon was fiercely disputed by

the Contra-Remonstrants. At any rate, the influence of that great friend of Luther on the Catechism on this precise point is difficult to demonstrate.

Despite the Reformed community's evident diversity, which was even greater than that among Lutherans, there was a deep-seated unity in the Reformed conflict with the Remonstrants. The church of France also accepted the doctrinal decisions of Dort and ascribed synodical authority to them. At the Synod of Dort, the delegates from the Palatinate were not the only defenders of their Catechism. The elderly David Pareus (1548–1622), a former student of Ursinus's, submitted a tract to the assembly that was read aloud in its entirety. In Heidelberg, he subsequently presented a detailed lecture to his students on the significance of what was at stake in Dort. In his view, there was no difference between the Catechism and the pronouncements of the Synod of Dort. Despite differences in approach, in part reflecting developments within the Reformed tradition, there were no essential differences in view. The importance of advances in theology becomes abundantly apparent when we compare the Heidelberg Catechism with the outcome of the great assembly that was held in Westminster Abbey thirty years after the Synod of Dort: a confession and two catechisms. The latter documents have been just as significant for the history of the church as has the Heidelberg Catechism.

Comparison with subsequent catechisms

Important confessional developments in England after the Reformation can only be sketched briefly here. As could have been expected, the English Reformation under King Henry VIII (1509–1547) was not very clearly defined. Its breach with Rome rested on grounds that had little to do with the teachings of the gospel that were rediscovered by Luther and others. As a matter of fact, initially Henry personally opposed Luther and, in the process, acquired the title *defensor fidei* (defender of the faith) from the pope. Nevertheless, under Henry's government, a gradual reorientation took place along the lines of the Reformation on the Continent. A delegation from England that visited Wittenberg produced the Wittenberg Articles (1536). Somewhat earlier, the king had endeavored to establish contact with Melancthon. The latter's influence was recognizable in the articles. The nexus of penance, faith, justification, and good works showed Luther's discovery to full advantage. Faith must be part of penance. Faith brings us to place our confidence in forgiveness. The terrified conscience is lifted up and comforted, not in recognition of the worthiness of our repentance or other works, but for Christ's sake. Good works are part of the new obedience. In the same year, Henry VIII formulated the Ten Articles, which spoke of justification by faith, combined



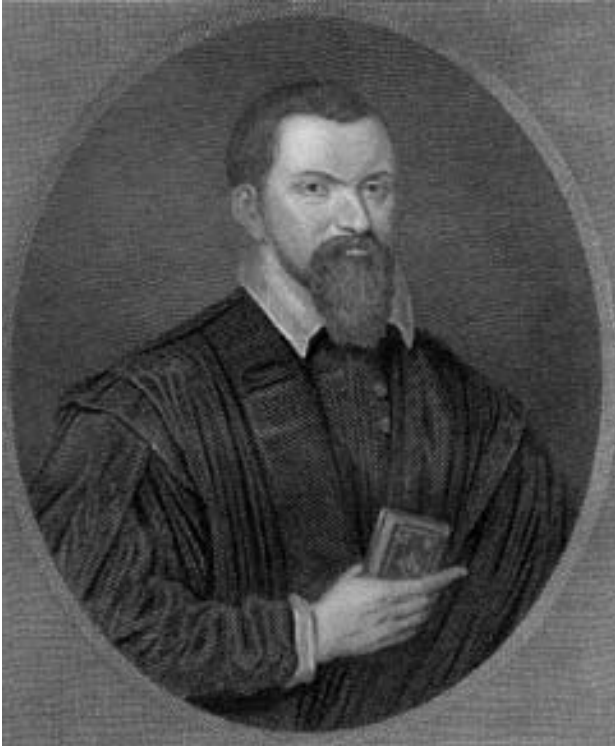
Thomas Cranmer

with repentance and conversion. Two years later, these fundamental concepts were reiterated in the Thirteen Articles, although they continued to be embedded in previous liturgical practices.

The Reformation did not fully break through until the reign of Edward VI (1547–1553), although his rule was too short to affect the hearts of his people. Nevertheless, a new catechism was produced (1548) that achieved three printings in a relatively short time. For this purpose, Archbishop Thomas Cranmer made use of the work of Osiander, who in turn borrowed a good deal from Luther's Small Catechism. Furthermore, a new edition of the Book of Common Prayer (1549) was published in 1552, which incorporated a new form for the administration of the Lord's Supper. A confession of faith was also added, which offered instruction about free will, original sin, justification, and good works along Reformational lines. Justification was described as the perfectly certain and most wholesome doctrine of Christianity. Noteworthy in this confession is the emphasis on the doctrine of election or predestination to life: "God's eternal resolve, whereby He decided from before the foundation of the world, according to His hidden purpose, to free from the curse and perdition those whom He predestined from among the human race, bringing them as vessels of honour to eternal salvation through Christ.

Therefore, those who are granted such a glorious benefit of God through His Spirit, who works at the appropriate time, are called according to His plan. They obey His call through grace, are freely justified and adopted as children of God, are made to conform to the image of His only begotten Son Jesus Christ, walk holily in good works and through God's mercy ultimately attain eternal life." The contemplation of our election in Christ leads to a sweet and inexplicable comfort to those who experience themselves to be within the power of the Holy Spirit, who destroys the works of the flesh and its earthly members and lifts up their consciences to heavenly and exalted things. With this confession, Cranmer succeeded in bringing the Reformation in England under the sphere of Bucer and Calvin's influence. The doctrine of predestination would take on lasting significance in the teachings of the church.

When, after the reign of Bloody Mary (1553–1558), the pursuit of reformation could be resumed, a Declaration of the Chief Articles of Religion, called the Eleven Articles (1559), was adopted. These entrusted spiritual power to bishops under the head of the church, Queen Elizabeth. Under her government (1558–1603) there emerged the beginnings of the movement that would



Robert Rollock

be known as Puritanism. Under Queen Mary, numerous spiritual leaders had fled to the Continent, where, in the centers of the Reformation, they absorbed ideas about the confession as well as the structure of the church. After her death they returned to England, where they sought to implement their new vision of a further reformation through manifestos and programs. To them, the doctrine of predestination was and continued to be crucial. In 1595, nine articles were adopted that came to be known as the Lambeth Articles, which adopted the doctrine of double predestination as the official teaching of the church. That this view was more than a temporary fad is confirmed by the great influence achieved by the Irish Articles of Religion (1615).

The Irish Articles referred to a covenant of the law engraved in man's heart at the time of creation. God promised him eternal life, on condition of perfect obedience to His commands, while disobedience was threatened with the penalty of death. Man fell into sin, but Christ became the Mediator of the Second Covenant. All those predestined by God were inseparably united with His body. United with Christ, they were reborn and made partakers of Him and all of His benefits. In these Irish Articles, we are struck by the emphasis on predestination, covenant, and justification. These three aspects of doctrine were to be combined into a single whole, especially at the Westminster Assembly. Unity among these components of doctrine was feasible because of several factors. We first mention the development of covenantal theology. In this regard there was a noticeable difference from the Heidelberg Catechism. In the Catechism, we do encounter the doctrine of the covenant, but in a subdued fashion. At Westminster the covenant played a special role in sacramental doctrine. In the confession and catechisms of Westminster, the covenant served to present the entire doctrine of faith in a transparent manner. This approach reflected the prominent place of the covenant in Puritan thinking.

There was an early connection between the confessional statements of Westminster and the Heidelberg Catechism. The head of the University of Edinburgh, Robert Rollock (1555–1599), presented lectures there on the Heidelberg Catechism and theological aspects of Beza's publications (*Quaestiones et responsiones*). Rollock was among the first to employ covenantal theology in a systematic manner, on the basis of the thesis that the entire Word of God reflects a covenant because God did not address man apart from a covenant. Therefore, every rational creature necessarily fell under one of two covenants: that of works or that of grace. Rollock addressed this idea in his *Questions and answers concerning God's covenant and the sacrament which represents a seal of God's covenant, compiled for the benefit of ordinary people* (Edinburgh, 1596). The covenant that God established with man consisted in the fact that He promised



Assertion of Liberty of Conscience by the Independents in the Westminster Assembly of Divines (painting by J. R. Herbert, ca. 1844)

man a certain benefit, which was based on a certain condition. Man accepted this condition. Like Ursinus, Rollock referred to the initial covenant as a covenant of nature or works and the subsequent covenant as a covenant of grace. The context of the first covenant was the good, holy, and unimpaired nature received by man in creation. The condition of the covenant of works consisted of good works proceeding from the good, holy, and unimpaired nature of man. This condition had nothing to do with faith in Christ, nor with the works of grace and regeneration. After the fall into sin, the covenant of grace persuaded people to seek refuge in the covenant of grace. This covenant was based on satisfaction obtained through Christ; atonement was achieved through the establishment of a new covenant with man. In the covenant of grace, God promised justification and eternal life on condition of faith in Christ the Mediator. Man accepted this requirement to believe. In this context, reference was made to a condition of the covenant of grace; at this point, it was obvious that this condition was entirely based on the grace of God. Thus, justification was incorporated into the doctrine of the covenant. The Westminster Assembly further elaborated this initial formulation.

In the Westminster Shorter Catechism, God's decrees preceded creation, providence, and particularly, the covenant. In the first covenant, once God had created man, He established a covenant of life with him, on the condi-

tion of perfect obedience. Following the fall into sin, all of humanity found themselves in a state of sin and misery. But God established a covenant of grace with the elect, in order to deliver them from this state of sin and misery. The Lord Jesus Christ, who is the Redeemer of the elect, and the Son of God, became incarnate. On the authority of His threefold office, He saved them from sin and misery. The Spirit makes us share in His benefits by binding us to Christ through effectual calling.

The Shorter Catechism places most of the emphasis on the inner workings of the Holy Spirit. He convicts man of sin and enlightens the mind to know Christ. He renews our will and thus leads us to embrace Christ, who is graciously offered to us in the gospel. This office of grace might have been given more emphasis. As a rule, there is no effectual calling apart from the sincere offer extended through the proclamation of the gospel—a fact fully emphasized in the Canons of Dort. It is obvious that the Westminster Confession, as well as both catechisms, were produced at a later stage than were the Canons of Dort. The resistance against Dort in France and the emerging rational manner of conducting theology led to a strongly defensive attitude at Westminster. It is clear that the progress of Reformed theology reflected further doctrinal refinements.

In England and Scotland of those days, the concept of the covenant had significance that was not only broadly political and purely ecclesiastical, but also deeply personal. It was a common custom for people of faith to draft a document in which they entered into a personal covenant with God. Examples of this are well known. This variegated background definitely affected covenantal thinking at the Westminster Assembly. It implied a connotation of “covenant” that was foreign to both the Canons of Dort and the Heidelberg Catechism.

The view of the Canons of Dort on the covenant is clearly described in the preface to the Authorized Translation of the New Testament. God has established a covenant with mankind “to grant them eternal life under certain conditions; which covenant is twofold, the old and the new.” The old covenant was established prior to the fall into sin, and is referred to as the covenant of the law. Since its conditions can no longer be met, “salvation must be sought in a different covenant, which is referred to as *the new one* and signifies that God has ordained His Son to be a Mediator and promises eternal life on condition that we believe in Him; and is called the covenant of grace.” It cannot be put more simply than this. This view is also found in the Canons of Dort: no elaborate doctrine of the covenant, but a biblical representation of the difference between the old and new covenants as presented

in the Reformation by Bucer, Calvin, and others. In essence, there is a single covenant, which is differentiated only in terms of its administration.

The Heidelberg Catechism speaks of God's covenant especially in connection with the doctrine of the sacraments. Its explanation is also considerably simpler than those of the Westminster catechisms. This difference in language reflects the way in which theology and biblical research were practiced in the seventeenth century. As far as the main issues are concerned, there are essentially no differences; yet there is a shift in emphasis. Like the statements of the Westminster Assembly, the Heidelberg Catechism contains good Reformational theology, but its formulation reflects a simpler methodology. It is based more directly on Scripture, while avoiding theological refinements. The experiential nature of the Heidelberg Catechism with its scheme of misery, deliverance, and gratitude, succeeds in speaking directly to the heart of its readers. The confessional statements of Westminster reflect a more refined theology and give more explicit recognition to the involvement of the Holy Spirit. Each approach has its own appeal and has had lasting implications within their own spheres of influence. In this connection, we cannot ignore the fact that in the Netherlands, the Heidelberg Catechism has played a significant role in the practice of godliness. This book of instruction also served as a confessional basis for a rapprochement of churches in the Netherlands. Although the Catechism was not incorporated into a church order, as was the case in the Palatinate, it was at least as significant for church governance.

Criticism of the Catechism

Criticism directed at the Heidelberg Catechism to some extent reflects issues related not only to tensions within Protestantism but also to its conflict with Rome. The Catechism addresses a number of issues in far more detail than we would find necessary today. There are a number of other elements of criticism that deserve closer investigation.

If this book of instruction were to be written today, wouldn't it have to mention some doctrines to which we feel deeply attached but that were hardly referred to in the Heidelberg Catechism, if at all? We are thinking of our current views with respect to the church, or a description of the work of the Holy Spirit. Doesn't it speak too little about the great future of Christ, so that all of eschatology receives too little attention?

It is indeed true that the Catechism reveals remnants of a conflict that at the time of the Reformation caused a rift between Luther and Zwingli, between subsequent Lutherans and adherents of the Reformed persuasion. However, in view of the history of the emergence of the Catechism, it would have been sur-

prising not to find any traces of these frictions within its questions and answers. We are thinking particularly of views with respect to the Lord's Supper.

The Lord's Supper

We owe to the conflict between Lutherans and the adherents of the Reformed persuasion not only the exhaustive explanation of the essence of the Lord's Supper, but also the description of the mystery of this sacrament as contained in questions 75 through 79. Frederick III decided to align himself with the Reformation because he had personally delved into the significance of the Lord's Supper. It is therefore not surprising that the difference with Lutheranism came to the forefront. This issue threatened to estrange him from his own family and his immediate colleagues within the empire. It is clear that the compilers of the Catechism consulted Calvin in connection with the interpretation of the Lord's Supper. This Genevan Reformer was not primarily concerned with the question concerning the presence of Christ. To him the critical issue was our partaking of the true body and blood of Christ. A shift in focus was implied, so that the issue was not so much the *how* of His presence, but whether we partake "of that one sacrifice of Christ, accomplished on the cross, and of all His benefits" (Q. 75). In Luther's judgment, a subjective element had taken the place of the real, objective presence of Christ. He thus felt justified in regarding Zwingli and Oecolampadius as fanatics. Subsequent Lutherans also applied this judgment to the Reformed persuasion, particularly Calvinists. In the process, we acquired in the Heidelberg Catechism a particularly thorough description of the great mystery that takes place in the celebration of the Lord's Supper by believers. We truly participate in communion with Christ through faith. We acquire a sincere and inward bond with Him who makes us eat and drink unto eternal life.

In the meantime, the question of the implication of Christ's ascension became particularly pertinent. How should we imagine Christ's presence at the table of the covenant in the light of His presence in heaven? The Catechism teaches that Christ is truly present at His Supper. "With respect to His Godhead, majesty, grace, and Spirit, He is at no time absent from us," although as "true man"—that is, "with respect to His human nature"—"He is no more earth," but in heaven (Q. 47). The question that now arises is whether this response implies that the two natures of Christ are so intertwined as to affect His person. We owe question 48 to this conundrum. Here the Catechism asks whether "these two natures in Christ [are] separated from one another." This question gives rise to the well-known "extra" dimension implied by the Catechism: Christ's Godhead is omnipresent. It is



The second edition of the Heidelberg Catechism (February 1563), in which question 80 was incorporated

not limited to His assumed, human nature. Although it remains completely united with His human nature, it is not limited to it. It is also present beyond this humanity. This “additional” presence of Christ or presence beyond His humanity has been interpreted as a typically Calvinistic idiosyncrasy. It could open the door to speculations concerning God’s revelation or the operation of the Divine Logos outside Christ. As a rule, we do not encounter such speculation on the part of Calvin or the Reformed community. This digression of the Catechism reflects the far-reaching set of issues associated with the conflict surrounding the Lord’s Supper. Whether Christ’s church can still benefit from these ideas today remains an open question.

Whereas the above conflict over the Lord’s Supper involved regrettable differences of interpretation among various movements within the Reformation, the issues surrounding the mass constituted an enormous conflict. To some Reformers the “popish mass,” referred to in question 80, represented a supremely refined form of justification by works. It was in conflict with the threefold *sola* of the Reformation, particularly the *sola* of grace and the *sola* of faith. Doctrinal developments pertaining to the mass led in the world of

Roman Catholic scholastic thought to a theologically pervasive and influential system of views concerning the church, the doctrine of grace, and atonement and forgiveness by means of indulgences. It was not so much the theological concept of the mass that was advocated at universities and schools that was at issue. The initial Reformational criticism targeted particularly the practice of this doctrine among ordinary people as manifested in a sort of trade in grace. The violent reaction of the Catechism must be understood against this background. The Lord's Supper is conducted in remembrance of the sacrifice of Christ; it is not a repeated act.

At the personal initiative of Elector Frederick III, Olevianus added question 80 at the very last minute. The rather provocative inclusion of this question must be ascribed to the Council of Trent's having pronounced its anathema against the Reformed view of the Lord's Supper. It is quite certain that the text of the canons and decrees of the Council of Trent was not available at Heidelberg at this time; the solid anathema, however, was well known. We may well conclude that the Catechism particularly opposed the perverted malpractices of the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Actually, the theology of Trent turned against medieval practices in no uncertain terms. But in the process, it also condemned the Reformational and evangelical views. The Catechism definitely does not advocate an empty celebration of the Lord's Supper as a ceremonial event that ignores Christ's *presentia realis* (true presence). On the other hand, nothing should ever detract from the one-time sacrifice of atonement accomplished on the cross of Golgotha. The real question is how we are made partakers of the person of the living Christ and His benefits.

Spirit, church, and prophecy

Apart from these points, there are several other issues that must be raised in the context of "shortcomings" of the Catechism. In part, these questions concern the authority of the Catechism as a confessional statement, which will be left aside in the present discussion. Ever since the sixteenth century, there have been differences of opinion regarding the authority of confessional statements—including the Catechism—especially regarding their relevance to our own time. Here we limit ourselves to three topics: the Holy Spirit, the church, and the significance of prophecy.

Many who allow themselves to be led by the modern charismatic movement, or who subscribe to evangelical thought, experience in the confessional statements a painful lack of focus on the Holy Spirit. According to them, the answer to the question: "What do you believe concerning the Holy Spirit?"

(Q. 53) contains too few biblical elements. The declaration that the Holy Spirit “is true and co-eternal God with the Father and the Son” is thought to have too little content. “That He is also given me, to make me by a true faith partaker of Christ and all His benefits, to comfort me, and to abide with me forever” apparently has too little content for someone who wants to see a description of the gifts and the fruits of the Spirit in their fullness. In the meantime, however, they miss the real significance of what is confessed here. The Spirit is the *Creator Spiritus*, the creating Spirit. He is just as much the Spirit of Christ. The unity of the work of the Triune God is found in creation, redemption, and consummation. In comparison with this perspective, the modern charismatic understanding of the Holy Spirit implies a diminution of reality, a shallow interpretation of certain charismatic gifts. What the Catechism further testifies concerning the Spirit and His work is inexpressibly rich. He makes us partake of communion with Christ. He comforts and guides those who are His own in a very individual manner. He forever abides with believers. Those who allow these ideas to sink in can only be amazed by the richness of the work of the Holy Spirit as it is described in the Catechism. The essence of the Person and the work of the Holy Spirit are clearly pointed out.

When we consider what the Heidelberg Catechism further teaches us about the Holy Spirit, we recognize aspects that can only enrich our understanding. The Spirit of Christ “assures [us] of eternal life, and makes [us] heartily willing and ready, henceforth, to live unto [the Lord]” (Q. 1). The Catechism places special emphasis on the connection between “the blood and Spirit of Christ” (Q. 69–71, 73), which indicates that the atonement through the cross and the Spirit are interconnected. Good Friday and Pentecost cannot be separated from each other. The Spirit of Pentecost is none other than the Spirit through whom Christ sacrificed Himself, and who also raised Him from the dead. It is also the Spirit who makes us appropriate what we have in Christ. According to the Catechism, the relationship between Christ and the Spirit is experienced in that the Spirit binds us to Christ. We are governed by one Spirit—the Spirit who dwells in Christ as the Head and in all of us as His members (Q. 76). This unbreakable relationship between Christ and the Spirit is of vital importance for a proper understanding of the reality of Christ’s work and guards us from interpreting the work of the Spirit in His relationship to Christ as spiritualism. The latter signifies a form of godliness that functions in isolation. It is our view that the Catechism clearly and satisfactorily presents the elements for a sound doctrine of the Holy Spirit.

Is the same thing true for the church? It is understandable that people consider Lord’s Day 21, which discusses the church, to be all too brief. Nev-

ertheless, it does present the essential elements for a biblical ecclesiology. Nowhere is a tiresome and exhausting view of the church rejected more effectively than in this concise description: it is the work of the living Christ. He “gathers, defends, and preserves” His church. This expresses the richness of God’s gracious election. Behind the church stands the miracle of God’s grace. It is this vision of the church that is presented to us so clearly in the first edition of Calvin’s *Institutes* (1536). The church and predestination go hand in hand. The church of Christ reveals the power of God’s eternal good pleasure. This is where the Lord dwells and where His salvation is obtained. What is here confessed in our book of instruction directly contradicts the disunity of the church that can only be ascribed to self-serving religion.

The Heidelberg Catechism does not ignore the structure of the church, as is clear from the model that it presents: a church where Word and discipline function as means of grace, administered by the office bearers of the church. Indeed, an image of the church emerges here in which Christians serve each other with the gifts that they have received as partakers of Christ’s person and gifts. In times of persecution and suppression, this structure of the church could help to keep the foundation of God’s house intact. In this regard, nothing of relevance has been lost over the centuries that have elapsed since the birth of the Catechism.

Our final point concerns prophecy that reaches out to the future, the culmination of God’s promises in the last days, particularly concerning Israel. Does the Catechism fall short in this regard? One might think so when, towards the end, in the discussion of the Lord’s Prayer, the church is equated with the kingdom of God (Lord’s Day 48). We tend to be more hesitant in this regard, in agreement with what the Lord teaches us about the kingdom in His parables. His kingdom is broader—infininitely broader—than the church. And the future is richer than what is pictured here for God’s kingdom. But we do not ignore the fact that the prophecies whose fulfillment is still anticipated are not equally clear and transparent in every respect. The fulfillment of prophecy is its best explanation. Restraint is advised. However, those who desire to hold back will nevertheless find in the Catechism sufficient material to prove that God’s future is certain. It will be more excellent than what we have ever been able to imagine.

According to the explanation of the Catechism, this—and no less than this—is the content of the Lord’s Prayer: “Thy kingdom come.” All “the works of the devil, every power that exalts itself against [God], and all wicked counsels conceived against [God’s] holy Word” will not be able to prevent the

fullness of the kingdom from arriving when one day the voice of all prophecy will be fulfilled. This kingdom will have come. And God will “be all in all.”

Continued relevance

Among the Reformed confessional statements, the Heidelberg Catechism has justifiably taken an enduring and important place. This was originally the primary purpose of this document. Frederick III took a convincing position within the Reformed tradition of his time. Many of his contemporaries also considered the adoption of this book as an important event. What was a decisive choice on the part of the elector 450 years ago continues to be a meaningful confessional statement to us. It definitely does not fall short in terms of theology. Nevertheless, our first impression is not of a theological dissertation but of a pastoral reaching out—even to modern man. To churches in the Netherlands and elsewhere, the Heidelberg Catechism remains an essential confessional statement. Its place beside the Belgic Confession of Faith is indisputable, especially since it addresses the church, which must be built up in the faith that was once delivered to it. The material that is presented in the Canons of Dort plays the same role but takes a different approach than that selected by the book of the “only comfort.”

In the wider Reformed context, in which numerous confessional docu-

Kohlbrugge on the Heidelberg Catechism

Through God's faithfulness the Catechism became the Catechism of the Palatinate and particularly the Netherlands. In the Netherlands this booklet has always been retained, so that it also became the Catechism for the Reformed church here in Elberfeld. All those who were ever converted to God agree with this Catechism. In contrast, those who remained unconverted continued to tinker with it.

The great truth has not been expressed in any book of instruction adopted by the Reformed church as clearly as in this document, namely this truth: that man is saved without himself contributing anything in the process, out of pure, free grace through Christ, and that for the entire life of faith, the life of sanctification and of good works, Christ is the Omega and the Alpha, the last and the first. In this way man is entirely bypassed in this doctrine of salvation; it is solely and exclusively the work of almighty grace.

Dr. H. F. Kohlbrugge, *De eenvoudige Heidelberger* (The Simple Heidelberg Catechism), Lord's Day 1.

ments have found a home, the Heidelberg Catechism continues to be the best-known statement. Its status is undisputed. It appears to be an essential characteristic of the Reformed tradition that it manifests itself in a multitude of confessions. Those who consult the collections of confessional statements contained in scholarly works are impressed with what tradition has produced in terms of such classical documents, which definitely do not have merely a historical significance. Among all of these, the Heidelberg Catechism occupies a recognized place of honor. Its significance has been far more enduring than a great number of onetime efforts that constituted pronouncements in concrete situations and established particular points of view. Many such declarations have had no lasting significance. The Catechism is in an entirely different category. It continues to figure among the church documents in which the compilers sought to focus on the testimony of Scripture.

It is fair to ask whether in a changing ecclesiastical context, with broadening horizons, the Heidelberg Catechism will retain its place. The recent publication entitled “*Belijdenisgeschriften voor de Protestantse Kerk in Nederland*” (Confessional Statements for the Protestant Church of the Netherlands) includes, beside the three confessional statements of the early church—the Apostles’ Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed—the unaltered Augsburg Confession, Luther’s Catechism, the Heidelberg Catechism, the Geneva Catechism, the Belgic Confession of Faith, and the Canons of Dort. In addition to these, a place was assigned to the Theological Declaration of Barmen and the Concord of Leuenberg. The position of the Protestant Church on the authority of the latter two documents differed to some degree from its stance on the other confessional statements. This difference was carefully worded; the significance of Barmen was recognized, and the Leuenberg Concord was believed to demonstrate that the Lutheran and Reformed traditions had found common ground in their joint understanding of the gospel.

The Barmen Theses and the Leuenberg Concord have found a place in virtually all modern editions of the Reformed confessional statements in Germany, France, Switzerland, and America, albeit not without dispute. The question of how the Heidelberg Catechism is related to these statements is important. The ecclesiastical position described in the Theological Declaration of Barmen must be interpreted in the light of its 1933–1934 context. The declaration reflects an attempt by the church to keep a place open for the gospel in society. This declaration made a very clear statement against the background of forces in the Third Reich that conspired to thwart the church and the gospel.

The situation is somewhat different for the “Concord of European Reformational Churches” (March 16, 1973). Lutheran and Reformed churches sought rapprochement in an ecumenical context. This document presented a dubious historical interpretation of the situation between Lutherans and the Reformed community in the sixteenth century. If this concord were correct, the compilation of the Catechism would have resulted from an erroneous interpretation of the reality of those days. In that case, the Catechism would contain a number of passages that would have to be discredited today. Not every Reformed believer would go this far without a fight.

The Heidelberg Catechism cannot be dismissed as merely a historical document. The comfort referred to in Lord's Day 1 applies to a large number of situations that trouble modern man. It addresses the foundations of the *consolatio animae*, the comforting of man's deepest essence and longings.

The Heidelberg Catechism also has lasting significance as a book of instruction, although present-day pedagogy would employ different methods and means. It is primarily written for the church. The theology on which it is based is rooted in the church, although it is not a theology of the church. Such a theology would fail to do justice to the richness and freedom of Holy Scripture and ignore the real work of the Holy Spirit. The Catechism recognizes a living relationship with the church, but its source is Scripture: “Word and Spirit” (Q. 31 and 123) or “Spirit and Word” (Q. 54). It seeks to be a book of instruction for the church, but always from the perspective of faith. That this is not just an external matter is obvious from its entire structure and its description of faith. It is the fervent language of experience that reveals salvation as an existential reality. We do not hesitate to identify this as the real power of this book. The Catechism has many great qualities. It serves simplicity without ignoring the broader dimensions of God's truth. Virtually everywhere and always it recognizes the central fact of God's love in Christ, which through atonement wins over the sinner to faith and strengthens him in this faith. What ultimately was the secret of the Reformation according to Luther, Bucer, Zwingli, and Calvin—namely, communion with Christ—is also the secret of this presentation of doctrine. At the center are the cross, Christ's blood and Spirit in atonement, forgiveness, renewal, and assurance. None of this can ever be separated from the *unio mystica*, the mystical union and hidden communion with Christ. Originating in Christ, the Catechism draws lines from doctrine to life, ethics, and the anticipation of the kingdom to come.

It is this true unity of doctrine and life, of knowledge and confidence, that gives the Catechism its own character. With God's blessing, its impact, which proved to be so powerful in the past, may also be anticipated for the future.

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