

30. CONFESSIONAL FAITH

The Heidelberg Catechism

(1849)

JEREMIAH H. GOOD AND HENRY HARBAUGH

The German Reformed Church was “the Church of the Heidelberg Catechism.” From the time of the founding of the church in America, in every trial of identity and survival, its leaders turned to this confessional standard as the plumb line of good theology, the lens for reading Scripture, the fountain of piety. During the 1840s, the Heidelberg Catechism provided a much-needed common ground when theological conflicts threatened to undo “Reformed Zion.”

*In 1847 John W. Nevin published *The History and Genius of the Heidelberg Catechism*. At about the same time, two young pastors, Henry Harbaugh (1817–67) and Jeremiah H. Good (1822–88), independently set to work to translate the catechism into English. Harbaugh, an 1843 graduate of the seminary at Mercersburg, was serving a church in Lewisburg. Later he became a pastor in Lancaster and Lebanon, a popular devotional and theological author, and a seminary professor. Good, an 1846 graduate of Mercersburg, spent his entire ministry in the Ohio Synod. There he edited the synod’s *Western Missionary* magazine, was instrumental in founding Heidelberg College in 1850 (serving for eighteen years on its faculty), and spoke out for the anti-liturgical party within the church.*

As they tell the story in the preface to the translation of the Heidelberg Catechism, the two scholar-pastors were nearly ready to go to press with their respective translations when they learned of their common labor. They agreed to issue one edition, and their collaborative efforts greatly increased the influence of the book.

The Heidelberg Catechism, dating from 1563, is an irenic document, striking a careful balance between rigidity and accommodation. In the introduction to the English edition, Good and Harbaugh affirmed that the catechism was not written “so much for the purpose of combating errors” as to present “the truths of the Bible” in a way that could unite evangelical Christians. Indeed, the original intent of the catechism was to support Lutheran and Reformed cooperation in the Palatinate region of Germany. In

1849 the English edition of the Catechism similarly sought to overcome differences between the advocates of the Mercersburg theology and those who held to a low church position more in line with other American evangelical denominations. The appearance of this English edition under the names of two recent Mercersburg graduates also assisted more liturgical churches in America to overcome their resistance to English worship.

Good and Harbaugh underscored essential German Reformed values. They affirmed the importance of catechesis, the slow and steady training of youth and adults within the church. Catechesis is the way the Holy Spirit creates Christians. The two men rejected the immediate, emotional, and spiritually disruptive nature of revivalism. They believed that memorization, lifetime worship attendance, and growth in theological understanding would help faithful German Reformed people to believe the words of the catechism’s famous first question: “I belong . . . not to myself but to my faithful Savior.”

The German Reformed tradition also placed great emphasis on family life within the church, leading the translators to pray that by using the catechism, families would “become what they are designed to be, tributaries to the Church.”

Preface by the Translators

It is a difficulty, which we presume all have felt in the practical use of the Heidelberg Catechism, that each answer has so many great truths compressed into it, as to make it almost impossible for any, except minds trained to theological study, to grasp their meaning rightly; at least not until long and repeated explanations have been made. This quality of the Catechism is by no means a fault; on the contrary, we commend it. It is in this way that a very large amount of religious truth is compressed into a few propositions; and when these are once committed to memory, and perfectly understood, the whole is easily retained for life.

As a symbol of faith, then, the bare Catechism is above all price. The church could have nothing better to hold up before the world as her faith; saying at the same time to all her children, in the language of the motto on the title page of the old editions of the Palatinate Catechism: “*According to this rule search the Scriptures.*” The Church needs, however, also, for the instruction of the young, this same symbol simplified. This want was felt by our forefathers in the Palatinate at an early date. Measures were also taken to meet this want. For this purpose they published, as early as 1684, the Catechism, a translation of which is here presented to the Church.

SOURCE: Jeremiah H. Good and Henry Harbaugh, *The Heidelberg Catechism* (Chambersburg, Pa.: M. Kieffer and Co., 1849), iii–xxiii.

This Catechism was intended to make the system of catechization more extensive, and at the same time more plain and easy. It was used pretty extensively in this country in the earlier history of the German Reformed Church. An edition, which is an exact reprint of the one "*Signat. Heidelberg, Sept. 1, 1684,*" was published in Philadelphia in 1777, also an edition in Easton 1829. Many of the oldest members of our Church still living, were instructed from it in their youth, and have still copies of it in their possession, and the contents of it warm in their hearts. Some have imported copies. All praise and cherish it, with the same enthusiasm as they do the recollections of their childhood and the vows of their youthful consecration to God. The language of their hearts is; May it live forever!

A want has been felt, for some years, of this Catechism in the English language. This want has frequently been expressed by ministers and laymen. Once indeed a petition for its publication was drawn up by members of the Theological Seminary, signed also by some ministers whose names could conveniently be procured, each one at the same time affixing to his name a certain number of copies which he obligated himself to take in case its publication should be procured. For some reason or other this fell through.

Having frequently ourselves felt this want, and heard it expressed by others, we have at last assumed the responsibility of translating and publishing it. Since it has been commenced, encouragements have been received from many sources, which make us hope that it will prove an acceptable service to the Church.

With the body of the work we have not felt ourselves at liberty to make any alterations. It is designed to be a faithful and exact translation, in letter and spirit of the original Palatinate Catechism—a Catechism the product of the Church, and sanctioned by many years of experience. The language in which forms of thought in a Catechism are expressed, being so important a matter, we would have hesitated to undertake the translation, were it not happily the case that it is almost entirely the language of the Catechism itself, or of the Holy Scripture.

The additions we have made both before and after the catechism, it is thought will add much to its value.

The advantages, which we humbly hope and believe may be derived from the publication and use of this catechism, are many and important. It may not be amiss to state a few of the more prominent in order.

1. It will make the instructions of the Pastor more successful, by affording the catechumen a better opportunity of studying and comprehending for themselves the contents of each question and answer. It has been found by the experience of all, that the bare catechism is quite too difficult for the capacities of many of the young; the more so, perhaps, because the instruc-

tions which the Pastor is to give, have not been preceded, in all cases, by sufficient instruction in its contents, in the family and school, as was the custom in the old order of our Church. Here, however, the questions and answers are dissected, and the means are at hand, not only to learn the language, but to study the doctrines. On these the Pastor can enlarge in his instructions with more satisfaction and hope of success; removing also what difficulties may still remain on the learner's mind. These instructions will then not only be better understood and remembered, but also more easily called up and revived in the mind by after perusal and study.

2. Some Pastors are in the practice of conducting among the young of their flock, Bible Classes, either at an hour on the Sabbath, or on an evening of the week. In such instructions this book could be taken as a guide. Could any exercise be more profitable, either to the young who are not yet confirmed, or to the young confirmed members of the Church, than to be led, by a faithful Pastor, through this excellent symbol of our faith? It would have a tendency to make them intelligent, consistent, and lovely christians; for that piety is always most lovely which is unfolded under the influence of pure christian nurture. Truly would the young members of the Church, thus instructed, be "like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season, and whose leaves do not wither."

3. This will be a useful book in the Sabbath School. Here children may be taught to commit it to memory; and this will be a great advantage when once they attend the instructions of the Pastor with a view to connect themselves fully with the Church. Moreover, the Teacher in the Sabbath School will not find it more difficult to instruct his class from this Catechism, than he now does to use in their instruction any of those question books commonly used in Sabbath Schools. Thus Teachers would become more directly co-workers with the Pastor, and the Sabbath School would be more decidedly connected with the Church.

4. This is also a suitable book for Parents, to be used in Family catechisation. But where is the parent that catechises his family?—It is true, it has been greatly neglected, and in many families it has entirely passed away! Oh! the evil which is the result of this neglect! May not, however, the reason of this neglect, be found in a great measure, in this, that families have not been furnished with a suitable catechism? Family catechisation belongs to the original order of our Church, is a means of great good, and should be again restored to proper respect. It is believed, and prayerfully hoped, that the introduction of the catechism into families will restore it. The want of a proper book is here happily met. Any parent of piety, and ordinary judgment and acquaintance with the Scripture, if he is truly anxious to instruct his family, can by the aid of this book, lead the

young minds of his children into a knowledge of the doctrines and duties of our holy religion. Let this be done.

5. The child who commits to memory the proof passages, here printed in full as answers to the questions, will commit the most important part of the Bible. The proof of doctrines is always given in the exact language of Scripture. Thus all those texts, which are generally used in the pulpit, in proof of doctrines, appear in the catechism and will be learned by the child. A child, therefore, who commits to memory the catechism will have all these passages in its mind.—There are passages of Scripture, of precept, of threatening, promise, and doctrine, which may be said to be *prominent* passages—these are generally used in public preaching, in social exhortation and in private religious conversation; these every professing christian *should be able to quote*. These passages are all brought forward in the catechism. They are committed, too, at exactly that time of life when it is, of all others, the most easy to commit to memory. How valuable will such treasures of sacred truth in the mind be! Lodged in the mind amid the dews of youth, they will be as seeds of life, which the Holy Ghost will quicken and perfect into fruits of salvation. Though they may seem to lie dormant for years, yet it is the office of the Spirit to “bring things to remembrance,” and this He will do, under circumstances which He knows to be best, with saving power. And will not the *impression* made on the mind when the passages are committed remain a part of the Spirit forever? The words of the passage may pass from the memory, so that they cannot always be recalled at will, but the living truth—never! It may sink and fade from sight, but only like the rill

“In matted grass, that with a livelier green
Betrays the secret of its silent course.”

It may be mentioned, in conclusion, that the design of publishing a translation of this venerable catechism was conceived by the undersigned about the same time, but entirely unknown to each other. Two translations were thus prepared, and were both almost ready for the press, before the similarity of their designs became known to each other. In this circumstance, as well as in the hearty approbation of the Church through her Synods, Classes and ministers, they recognize the approbation of the Head of the Church, in this effort to serve His kingdom on earth.

May a faithful God, according to his promise, pour out his spirit richly upon our children, that they may learn rightly to know and honor him, overcome Satan, and become heirs of eternal life, through Jesus Christ, in whom all the promises of God are Yea, and Amen.

J. H. GOOD,
H. HARBAUGH.

August 15, 1849.

History of the Heidelberg Catechism

The Reformed Churches cherish the Heidelberg Catechism with affectionate regard. And justly so, for it is confessedly one of the noblest monuments of human piety and genius. It has been received by so many branches of the Church, and been translated into so many different languages, that it is natural some interest should be felt in its origin and history.

It is the symbolical book of the German Reformed and Ref. Dutch Churches of this country, and of several branches of the Ref. Church on the continent, and translations of it have appeared in the Latin, Greek, Dutch, Spanish, French, English, Bohemian, Polish, Hungarian, Arabic and Malay languages.

The Catechism derives its name from the city of Heidelberg in Germany, where it was first published, and which was at that time the capital of the Palatinate,—a most fertile and productive portion of Germany lying on both sides of the Rhine, and of which FREDERICK THE THIRD, surnamed *the Pius*, was the Elector.

Different Confessions of Faith had been previously drawn up for the Reformed Church, and an excellent Catechism for the Church in German had been drawn up by Calvin. But when this Catechism appeared, by its happy union of a confession and a catechism, and by reason of its manifold excellencies, it was speedily adopted by the Reformed Churches in different countries, so that it is sometimes designated by the name of “*The Reformed Catechism*.”

The occasion of its composition was this:—The Palatinate, which had early abandoned the errors of Rome, had at first received the Lutheran faith, subsequently, however, it passed over to the Reformed interest.

The Elector, from deep inward conviction it would seem, wishing in his pious zeal, to provide for the more thorough religious instruction of the youth, requested two of his distinguished theologians to draw up a formulary of Christian doctrine. These were CASPAR OLEVIANUS, and ZACHARIUS URSINUS; the former a scholar of Calvin, and at this time Professor of Theology, in the University of Heidelberg, and preacher to the court; the latter a disciple of Melancton, and then one of the most distinguished Professors of the University of Heidelberg.

The conception or plan of the Catechism is ascribed to Olevianus; while its execution seems to be due entirely to Ursinus. In the year 1563 it was completed and submitted to the investigation of a Synod composed of the Superintendents and principal Pastors of the entire Palatinate. The Catechism was fully examined at several successive sittings of the Synod, unanimously approved, and shortly after published in both the German and Latin languages; and such was the favor with which it was received by the entire Palatinate, that four editions were called for in the first year.

Subsequently the Catechism was divided into fifty two sections, or Lord's Days; it being the duty of each pastor to go over the whole Catechism once a year in his preaching. Catechetical instruction was attended to on every Sabbath afternoon, at which not only the children and youth of the congregation were expected to be present, but adults also.

The Catechism thus became established, by the authority of Frederick, throughout the entire Palatinate, as the symbolical book of the Reformed Church.

But its authority did not stop there. It was introduced into Switzerland, and to a considerable extent took the place of the Catechism in use there formerly. In France it was highly respected. In England and Scotland it was held in high honor. In Hungary it was adopted by the Reformed Church as its symbolical book; and the same is true of Poland also. It was used in Catechetical instruction in different portions of Germany. It became the established creed of the Reformed Church of the Netherlands, by a formal decree of the Synod of Dort A.D. 1574, and ministers were required to preach on it in the afternoon of Sundays. It became in fact to be acknowledged very early as *the Catechism*, emphatically, of the Reformed Church in general. Other Catechisms, and Creeds, and confessions of Faith were confined to particular countries and provinces; but the Heidelberg Catechism was appealed to by the different branches of the Reformed Church in Switzerland, France, Holland, Germany, England and Scotland. It was adopted as a text book of theology in Universities, and learned theologians made it the basis of their Systems of Theology.

The Catechism was early brought to America. Two centuries ago it was adopted by the Reformed Dutch Church, and that respectable body of Christians have held on to it to the present day. About 100 years ago the Reformed Church of German descent, now generally known by the name of the German Reformed Church, sprang up, and throughout her two Synods this is the acknowledged and only authorized Creed and Catechism.

Analysis of the Catechism

The Heidelberg Catechism was drawn up not so much for the purpose of combating errors, and condemning other denominations, as of bringing forward and inculcating *the truths of the Bible*. It is mild and pacific in its character, and by the method that was wisely adopted, brings forward in a beautiful and systematic form all the most important doctrines of the Evangelical faith. It has often been remarked, that amid the many and conflicting views held by professed Christians of different names, at the present day, there are few who hesitate cheerfully to subscribe to this Catechism.

Its method of presenting the whole Gospel plan of salvation, is the same as that adopted by the Apostle Paul in his epistle to the Romans. The Apostle

there first "exhibits the helplessness of the human race under the law, then the gospel method of righteousness, and finally, from the 12th chapter to the end, the duties which spring naturally from the principle of christian gratitude." Thus the catechism begins with a contemplation of the misery of man in his natural state . . . ; sets forth in the second place the glorious plan of redemption . . . ; and represents in the end, the proper practical fruits of this great salvation in the life of the regenerate man. . . .

The arrangement of the Catechism as a whole, is simple, beautiful and clear; while the freshness of a sacred religious feeling breathes through its whole execution. It is for the heart full as much as for the head. "The pathos of a deep toned piety flows like an under current, through all its teachings, from beginning to end." The truths it presents are biblical, and the manner of presenting them certainly not unpsychological. It follows the leadings of the Spirit of Truth, which convinces of "sin, and righteousness, and of a judgment to come." How beautiful the order, first to contemplate one's self separate, then God and Jesus Christ, and to learn our relation to him; or, who we are by nature, what God had done and is doing for us, and what we owe to him! All this does the Catechism teach us.

After a beautiful introduction to the Catechism (Q. 1 and 2.) it opens by asserting in the most positive terms the general corruption and depravity of human nature (Q. 2. 3. 4 and 5), and affirms that this has its ground in the very life of the race (Q. 6 and 7). This ruin having affected the whole race, no single sinner is able to surmount it (Q. 8). God, although merciful, justly punishes the sinner for this non-obedience of his holy law (Q. 9. 10. 11.), not only with temporal, but with eternal punishment.

But all that was lost to the human race in Adam, has been regained to us in Christ. He possesses all the qualifications needed to constitute him a perfect Savior of his people. (Q. 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18), being both God and man; so that in him the same human nature which has sinned, makes full satisfaction for sin, and becomes thus the righteousness of God in him as the second Adam. This Savior is brought to us by the Gospel (Q. 19), but all do not receive him (Q. 20).

Faith in Christ is the medium by which this Saviour and all his benefits are applied to the sinner (Q. 21), and this faith includes a living apprehension of all the doctrines of Christianity, as briefly included in the ancient Apostolic Creed (Q. 21-23). These doctrines are then fully explained, comprehending, first, the doctrine of God the Father and our creation (Q. 25-28); secondly, of God the Son, and our redemption (Q. 28-52); and, thirdly, of God the Holy Ghost and our sanctification (53-59).

The cardinal doctrine of the Reformation—justification by faith, through the imputation of Christ's satisfaction, righteousness and holiness,—is

brought forward (Q. 60, 61); thus excluding all merit on the part of ourselves (Q. 62, 63).

This three-fold imputation makes itself known at once by bringing forth fruits of thankfulness (Q. 64). This faith is no product of man, but the "Holy Ghost works it in our hearts by the preaching of the Gospel, and confirms it by the use of the Sacraments" (Q. 65).

The nature and use of the Sacraments is then fully explained (Q. 67–85).

The third part of the Catechism then commences, and explains the practical fruits that will necessarily flow from the regenerate man. These are termed fruits of thankfulness. From the principle of thankfulness flow our good works (Q. 86), and those who do them not have not the evidence of conversion in their hearts (Q. 87). Conversion is explained (Q. 88–90). Then the nature of good works (Q. 91). In giving this exposition the Catechism goes over an explanation of the ten Commandments (Q. 92–115); discusses the subject of prayer (Q. 116–118); and closes with a beautiful and appropriate explanation of the Lord's Prayer (Q. 119–129).

Hints for Using the Catechism

(1) The Catechism is divided into fifty two Sabbaths, in order that those ministers who catechise on the Sabbath, or preach on the catechism, may be able to go over the whole of it in one year.—In the days of the Reformation, and even yet on the continent it is the usual order, for the Pastor to lecture on the Catechism on Sunday afternoon to all the youth of the congregation, including also frequently a large number of the adult.

(2) It is earnestly recommended, that in catechising the youth, they be required to commit to memory, word for word, the whole Catechism and every printed proof text. Care should be taken that they repeat it with clearness, distinctness and propriety of utterance.

(3) It is sometimes desirable and necessary to abridge the Catechism for the purpose of passing over it more rapidly; as the case when very young persons are instructed in it in parochial schools, or where time is not allowed to go over the whole. To enable the instructor to do this more readily, the more important questions are marked with an asterisk (*), which can be gone over while all the others are omitted, thus forming a *shorter Heidelberg Catechism*, containing the substance of the larger.

(4) On commencing with a class of Catechumens who are looking forward to the privilege of confirmation, the Pastor should always make them a solemn address on the importance of their relation to the Church by baptism, their privileges in consequence of this relation and the solemn undertaking before them. It has also been the custom of some ministers at the close of such exer-

cise, to ask each personally whether it is his or her sincere desire now to seek that knowledge and preparation of heart which is necessary to a full connection with the Church. This may be followed by an affectionate exhortation to diligence in study and prayer. The necessity of avoiding now, worldly companions, and seeking the fellowship of each other and of God's people, ought also to be warmly laid to their hearts. It will also be well for the Pastor to comment on those questions and counsels at the end of the Catechism. He may select some one for this purpose at the close of each Lecture. It will aid them in the after use for self-examination. They may be able, in connection with their own thoughts on them, to call up much which their Pastor has said in his comments on them, and exhortations from them.

(5) The question can often be introduced by some remarks which will enable the learner to comprehend the thought of the answer more easily.

(6) After the answer is repeated, the learner should be required to give the substance of its contents, as given, in a compressed form, in the first question and answer under "Explanation and Proof." After some explanation of words, and perhaps a general outline of the doctrine, the instructor will have before him a *skeleton*, which he may follow, in the succeeding questions and answers. It is a good practice, to exercise the minds of children, to require them to point out in which word, or in what part of the proof-text the proof lies. This is designated in the German by printing the words in larger type; but as it would look awkward in English, it has not been done. This may be only the better, if the above practice is adopted—it will accustom the learner to habits of thinking. Where notes occur, it will be well to ask a question formed from the substance of the note.

(7) Not only do the different questions form a skeleton which brings out the doctrine in order, but the proof texts are so arranged, that they form a skeleton, bringing out in order the doctrines under which they are placed, as proofs. As this is very important and useful to the instructor we will illustrate it by some examples. In the first question of the Catechism, the first question under which more than one proof is placed, is this: "How do you prove that Christ, with his precious blood, has fully satisfied for all your sins?" Under it are three proofs. If you turn to it you will see that the FIRST shows that he paid the *price* for our sins: The SECOND shows that the price was his BLOOD, and that it was for our *cleansing*: The THIRD shows that these benefits are *for all*, and that he gave not only his blood but HIMSELF, in all his offices. The next proofs that occur, (also in the first question) have reference to the doctrine of the Divine Providence. Here are two proofs, the first has reference to *upholding*: a sparrow shall not fall. The second to *preserving*: a hair shall not perish. The next question with proofs has reference to the assurance which is given us by the Spirit. Here also are two

proofs. The first shows that the Spirit assures us of our *adoption* and consequent *heirship*. The second shows that the Spirit assures us by a *seal* and an *earnest*. The last one in the first question has reference to Christ's making us willing to live to him. Here are two proofs. The first shows that he works this willingness by clearing away difficulties *before* us. The second by affecting our will *in* us.

(8) Let parents notice that the Catechism is divided into fifty two parts or Sabbaths. Let the parent assign to his children a "SABBATH" for each week. Let him see that the children commit it to memory, and study its contents as well as they can. Then at some hour on the Sabbath, either before or after the public worship of the Sanctuary, let him gather his children around a table. Let him ask the questions, and hear them repeat the answers correctly, and make such remarks and explanations as he may be able, and as shall suit the circumstances and capacities of his children. Let all be closed with a hymn and prayer. How blessed and happy would such a family be! It is only what God requires at the hand of parents. The Father is priest in his family; he must stand between his children and God, and bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. God gives him time for it—the Sabbath—and he will give grace to him who seeks grace to perform this duty. And Oh! what a promise is in it. "I will pour my Spirit upon thy seed, and my blessing upon thine offspring, and they shall spring up as among the grass, as willows by the water courses. One shall say, I am the Lord's; and another shall call himself by the name of Jacob; and another shall subscribe with his hand unto the Lord, and surname himself by the name of Israel." Isa. 44:3-5.

(9) In the Sabbath School let the Catechism be repeated by the children who can read well enough to commit to memory, taking each Sabbath the portion assigned to a Sabbath. Let also the larger scholars be placed in a class with a suitable instructor, where the pastor has not time to attend to it.

If, according to these suggestions, Parents, Sabbath School teachers, and Pastors unite their efforts in the instruction of children, we may confidently look for precious results. Then will Zion arise and put on her beautiful garments. Families will unitedly choose and serve the Lord, and become what they are designed to be, tributaries to the Church. Children will no more, first despise, then wander, and at last perish. Zion will enlarge the place of her tent; she will strengthen her stakes and lengthen her cords, and celebrate the turning of her cold captivity with exceeding joy.