

Electoral Frederick III: Father of the Heidelberg Catechism

How much do you value your Heidelberg Catechism? You and I have the opportunity to sit under Catechism preaching nearly every Sunday of the year. What a delight! Talk to seasoned ministers and older members in our churches; they will tell you that they have grown in their appreciation for this treasure over the years. Not only is the Catechism very logical in its treatment of doctrine, but it is also written and presented beautifully. Every Lord's Day is permeated with the comfort that every Christian needs. What in literature can possibly compare in beauty and depth to this monumental work?

To focus on the whole history of the Catechism would be too much for this article. We would, however, do well to highlight some of the important events which led up to the writing of it. I want to especially focus on the work and influence of Frederick III, the father of the Catechism. There is much application for us today in this interesting history. The history of the Catechism takes us to the Palatinate. The Palatinate was the largest and wealthiest province in Germany around the mid-1500s, and Heidelberg was its capital. Frederick III was one of seven electors in various provinces responsible for choosing the emperor. The Palatinate elector was head over all the other electors, and so he possessed considerable political sway.^[1]

In order to understand how God's providential hand brought about the formulation of the Catechism, we should step back in history and briefly examine just a few of the controversies and troubles that Heidelberg experienced. Heidelberg held a mixture of groups—Lutherans, Melancthonians, Calvinists, and Zwinglians. These varying traditions brought much unrest to Heidelberg. One man in particular, Tilemann Hesshus, a strict-Lutheran, stirred up much controversy. He became the general superintendent of the churches, dean of the theological faculty, and a pastor in the Church of the Holy Spirit. His hunger for power knew no bounds—he wanted all the attention and all the fame. In his mind, he could do nothing wrong.^[2] He introduced certain elements in the liturgy that again paved the road back to Roman Catholic practices, especially in regard to the Lord's Supper. In another instance, he tried to refuse one young man, Stephen Sylvius, from obtaining his doctor's degree because he would not insert material Hesshus wanted him to include in his thesis. Hesshus' obnoxious, unrelenting personality could not be tolerated. The university senate barred him from their meetings. He lashed out, saying that the Heidelberg professors promoted godlessness and were not worth a cent.^[3] Hesshus also directly attacked another university student, Wilhelm Klebitz, for his views of the Lord's Supper, which closely reflected Calvin's views.^[4]

More trouble was brewing, especially controversy around the Lord's Supper. In 1559, a special synod agreed upon the Stuttgart Confession which contained the doctrine of ubiquity, teaching that the human nature of Christ was everywhere present. Applied to the Lord's Supper, this meant that Christ was present in the Supper. Acceptance of these views only sharpened the differences in Heidelberg, widening the gulf between the strict-Lutheran and Reformed positions concerning the Lord's Supper.^[5] Additionally, in 1560, area theologians engaged in a formal debate on the Lord's Supper in what is known as the Wedding Debates, during the wedding of Frederick's third daughter, Dorothea Susanna. As one author humorously adds, "What could be more appropriate during the long week of celebration than a formal debate on the Lord's Supper?"^[6] While the debaters discussed nothing new, the debate did prove to deepen the divide between the parties involved, and Frederick started to favor the Calvinist position on the Lord's Supper more and more.^[7]

Something we should take notice of here before we go on is that Frederick did not come to his conclusions merely from discussions with theologians. True enough, debates and controversies sharpened his views, but more importantly, he became convicted of the biblical position of the Lord's Supper, as outlined in the Catechism's treatment of it, through personal study. "He was a diligent student of Scripture and accepted only that advice which his own study confirmed. Recognizing that he was only 'a poor simple layman,' he was confident, nevertheless, that patient study, prayer, and the guidance of the Holy Spirit would enable him to understand the Scriptures and reach the truth in the problems faced."^[8]

How important this is today for us, young people! Sometimes I believe we can rely entirely upon our ministers, elders, teachers, and parents to give us all the answers we need. It is good and right that we look up to them and listen to them, but we are also called to study the Word ourselves and to compare their teaching to the teaching of Scripture. We must never blindly follow a man or woman whom we trust; humans make errors, often unintentionally. God's Word is the final Word in all matters, and we must all become well-acquainted with its pages.

Back to the history. As can be seen, controversy riddled Heidelberg. The unrest and fighting needed to be settled quickly before more damage was done. In early 1562, Frederick ordered the formulation of the new Catechism for the Palatinate.^[9] Frederick listed his reasons for commissioning the new Heidelberg Catechism in his Preface on January 19, 1563. Let me allow Frederick to speak for himself:

[Some of the area schools and churches were] entirely without Christian instruction, others being unsystematically taught, without any established, certain, and clear catechism, but merely according to individual plan or judgment; from which, among

other great defects, the consequence has ensued, that they have, in too many instances, grown up without the fear of God and the knowledge of His word, having enjoyed no profitable instruction, or otherwise have been perplexed with irrelevant and needless questions, and at times have been burdened with unsound doctrines.^[10]

Put simply, schools and churches were not always teaching the Truth of God's Word, and many of the teachers proved unorganized and sloppy in their teaching. The result? Those who sat under this teaching became confused with perplexing questions, and even worse, lacked the fear of God and knowledge of his Word. Heidelberg was filled with controversy, ignorant and deceiving teachers, and great unrest; God in his providence gave this Catechism at just the right time!

Frederick's words quoted above should strike us. How similar conditions in Heidelberg are to our day! We live in a church-world full of confusing, perplexing, and unnecessary questions. In addition, the preaching in many churches is more like a lively conversation, more concerned about social ills in the world than teaching about sin, Jesus Christ, the greatness of God, and salvation. Instead of carefully preparing biblically sound sermons from week to week, many ministers hastily type out a couple pages of notes on Saturday night, mostly containing opinions with only a thread of biblical teaching. The sheep in these congregations are starving. Not only is the feeding of the sheep put aside, but the leaders of these congregations neglect to do maintenance to the fencing around the pasture, allowing the wolves ready entrance to devour the sheep. False prophets easily deceive and devour malnourished sheep. Satan smiles.

Returning back to the history, the question must be asked, what was the reaction to the Catechism after its appearance in public? As could be expected, both Elector Frederick and the new Catechism received harsh criticism, especially from Frederick's Lutheran relatives. One such critic was Frederick's own son-in-law, Duke John Frederick of Saxony. John Frederick was bold enough to say that his father-in-law was in the grip of Satan.^[11] Elector Frederick's answer to his son-in-law is both instructive and beautiful:

You have been unnecessarily anxious, as if I were in danger of being deceived by the devil's instruments; but thank God, I have attained to such an age, and to such knowledge and understanding of the divine Word that I am not moved about by every wind of doctrine. I would also most heartily wish that all others, setting aside their own feelings and the views of men, might be governed and led by God's Word alone. In other respects I acknowledge before God, as is proper, that I am a poor sinner, and I pray daily for the forgiveness of my sins, and that by the power of the Holy Ghost I may grow more and more in the knowledge of His dear Son, my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.^[12]

Truly, the Catechism we have today reflects Frederick's words of being led by God's Word alone, and not the feelings and views of men! How important this is! We must be young people led, directed, guided, and completely bound by the Word of God. Feelings are real, but they must not be our guide.

Again I ask—how much do we value our Heidelberg Catechism? Knowing the controversies out of which it came should make us more thankful for it. Do we realize the importance of a regular, organized system to study the Word of God? Frederick recognized its importance: “It is essential that our youth be trained in early life, and above all, in the pure and consistent doctrine of the holy Gospel, and be well exercised in the proper and true knowledge of God.”^[13] The Catechism is thoroughly biblical, taking its content from the Word of God, laced with the theme of comfort. Its strength is that it takes the various teachings of Scripture and condenses them into a very clear, logical format. The result? A spiritual feast! What a blessing to have this same Catechism taught in catechism classes and preached on Sunday from week to week. May this very brief history, young people, deepen our love for this gift of God to the church of Jesus Christ!