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THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM:
AN ECUMENICAL CONFESSION



URSINUS COLLEGE

Founders' Day Address

NOVEMBER 4, 1962

by

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Zacharias Ursinus

Ursinus College was named for one of the 16th century Reformers, less well known by name than some but no less influential.

Zacharias Ursinus was born in 1534 in Brelau, Germany. The family name was Baer (which accounts for the bear figuring prominently in the traditions of Ursinus College), and as Zacharias Baer he was baptized. But, "according to the fashion of the learned world in that period," Zacharias Baer adopted the Latinized version of his family name (Latin "ursus" meaning "bear") and the Reformer is known to us as in history by the name of Zacharias Ursinus.

The importance of Ursinus in Reformation history and the distinctive character of *The Heidelberg Catechism*, of which he was the primary if not the sole author, can be understood only in light of the tensions which developed in Germany in the early days of the Reformation between the followers of Martin Luther and the followers of Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin. The two segments of Protestantism were really in substantial agreement. The differences which arose were due in large part to the degree of emphasis each group placed on one aspect of the Christian life. The Lutherans emphasized the Christian life as being lived in "the freedom of forgiven sonship." The Zwingli-Calvin, or Reformed, group stressed "conformity to the will of God as set forth in the Bible" as being the essence of the Christian life. Lutherans emphasized the grace and love of God. The Reformed segment emphasized the sovereignty of God.

Unfortunately each group came to hold its particular emphases so tenaciously that harsh rivalries developed between them. Among Lutherans a young theologian of Wittenberg University, Philip Melancthon, tried to mediate between the holders of extreme views.

Zacharias Ursinus studied under Melancthon at Wittenberg for about seven years. Eventually, in 1561, he became Professor of Theology at the University of Heidelberg where the Reformed tradition had come to predominate. The ruler of that part of Germany asked Ursinus to prepare a catechism which would incorporate the best of both the Lutheran and the Reformed emphases and thus bridge the widening gulf between the two segments of Protestantism.

The Heidelberg Catechism—129 questions and answers—was the result. A 19th century German scholar characterized this work of Ursinus as having "Lutheran inwardness, Melancthonian clearness, Zwinglian simplicity, and Calvinistic fire, harmoniously blended." An American church historian described it as "the most sweet-spirited and experiential of the expositions of Calvinism." It became, as Will Durant has said, "the accepted expression of the Reformed faith in Germany and Holland," and enjoyed wide use and official sanction in Scotland. It was this catechism which was brought to America by German Reformed pastors and lay people whose descendants established Ursinus College.

Zacharias Ursinus was only twenty-nine years old when in 1563 *The Heidelberg Catechism* was first published. It is this volume which reflects "the principles represented by him whose distinguished name the College bears" to which reference is made in the Constitution of Ursinus College.

THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM:

AN ECUMENICAL CONFESSION

JAMES ILEY MCCORD

It is a very great honor to be asked to deliver the Founder's Day address at Ursinus College and to have been made an *alumnus, honoris causa*, of this distinguished institution of higher learning. As a member of a sister communion within the Reformed family, I have for many years been impressed with your spiritual and intellectual standards and with the contribution Ursinus has made in the training of Christian leadership for service both at home and abroad.

In January, 1963, Reformed churches throughout the world will be celebrating the Quarto-centenary of the publication of the Heidelberg Catechism, an inspired document produced by two scholars, Ursinus and Olevianus, when both were in their twenties. This anniversary will be the occasion of the publication of a fresh translation of the text of the Catechism into English, and of commentaries, books, and addresses, not merely out of filial duty to the past but primarily as witnesses to a living confession still at the heart of a great Christian tradition.

The relevance of the Heidelberg Catechism came home to me afresh in the summer of 1956, when I was a member of a team of three ministers sent on a preaching mission to the Reformed churches in Slovakia. Here was a tradition I had not known before, a remnant of the Hungarian Reformed church that now finds itself cut off from Budapest and Debrecen. It is part of a church to whom life under the cross is not strange, for the restrictions under the present communist regime are similar to restrictions known in earlier years under the Turks and the Hapsburgs. My colleagues and I, who had come from abroad and who had only read of the pressures under which the church lived, were completely unprepared for the crowds that thronged every service and for the high percentage of young people found worshipping in each congregation. When we made inquiries about how the church is able to hold its youth in the face of steady Marxist propaganda, we were told that each minister instructs the young people of his congregation every Sunday afternoon, using the Heidelberg Catechism as the basis of his teaching. Here, indeed, is a living symbol, still able to accomplish that for which it was first prepared in the sixteenth century. It was designed to be at once a guide for the religious instruction of youth and a confession of faith for the whole church.

One of Many Confessions of Faith

The Heidelberg Catechism belongs to a family of confessional statements, for it has been characteristic of Reformed churches never

to have produced a common confession of faith as did the Lutherans in the Augsburg Confession. "This is partly due to the fact," as Dr. Visser 't Hooft has reminded us, "that the 'Reformed' Reformation has several different sources and partly to the fact that the confessions of faith, according to Reformed doctrine, have a concrete and historical rather than a general and permanent significance. They are provisional statements of the teachings of a given church, statements which can and should be tested again and again in the light of God's present and active Word spoken through Holy Scripture, which alone is the 'infallible rule,' and to which 'no human documents, however holy they may have been, should be compared.'"

It is for this reason that the World Alliance of Reformed and Presbyterian Churches has steadfastly resisted all pressures to draw up a confessional statement for all its member churches. However, it is time for the Alliance now to take the lead in introducing to its entire constituency the many confessions that have sprung up in the Reformed tradition and that should be shared as a common heritage. I am quite certain, for example, that my own communion would be immeasurably enriched if it added to its present subordinate standards, the Westminster Confession and the Shorter and Larger Catechisms, the Heidelberg Catechism and the Second Helvetic Confession.

The Heidelberg Catechism may, for several reasons, be styled the most ecumenical confession of the Reformation period. This characteristic was inherent in its genesis. It is common knowledge that the religious situation was extremely complicated during the Reformation, and nowhere were the complications greater than in Germany. It is well to be reminded, as we begin this short survey of the Catechism's background, that no less an authority than the Lutheran historian, Ernst Troeltsch, has claimed that "it was only the resistance of German Lutheranism, and the independence of Anglicanism, which forced Calvinism to become an independent Protestant church." This type of Protestantism found its way late into the Rhineland, although Bucer's Reformation in Strasbourg revealed many affinities with the Reformed discipline. In the late 1550's the University of Heidelberg became the scene of bitter dissension and conflict, in which those who followed the moderate Lutheranism of Melanchthon as well as those tinged with Zwinglianism and Calvinism were condemned, and forms of worship and ceremonial much too elaborate for the elector, Otto Henry, were introduced. He, as well as his successor Frederick III, was alienated, and later Frederick patently turned more and more toward Geneva and began to promote Calvinism in his province. His was a Calvinism that was "no simple product of Geneva but was tinged with a Melanchthonian spirit."

Enter Ursinus—Second Choice

The elector was now compelled to find new religious leaders, and he tried unsuccessfully to bring Peter Martyr, then in Zurich, to the faculty of the University of Heidelberg. Martyr declined this invitation because of age, just as earlier he had declined a call to England, but he recommended a brilliant young German student, Zacharias Ursinus, for the post. Ursinus had spent nearly seven years at Wittenberg under Melanchthon, had visited other Reformation centers, and had heard Calvin lecture and preach in Geneva. It was Zurich, though, that led him to the Reformed faith, and Peter Martyr was his guide and mentor. Now, at the age of twenty-seven, Ursinus was ready to begin his work in Heidelberg, where he joined Caspar Olevianus of Treves, who had studied law at Orleans and Bourges and later had studied theology for a year at Geneva. John T. McNeill comments that Olevianus "was two years younger than Ursinus, more eloquent and less scholarly." One was primarily a preacher, while the other was first of all a professor, but both were members of the faculty of the theological school which Frederick had created.

One of the first tasks facing the two young men was the preparation of a catechism that would supplant older and conflicting ones. This the elector authorized, and the Heidelberg Catechism was prepared on the basis of two Latin drafts of Ursinus and a German draft of Olevianus. The elector himself took great interest in the preparation at every stage, at times supplying his own corrections, and producing the preface for the finished product.

From this brief historical statement it is clear that three streams of Reformation thought flowed into this document. The first was Lutheran, but it was the Lutheranism of the quiet and irenic Melanchthon and not the rigorous and uncompromising scholasticism and ceremonialism that characterized second-generation Lutherans. The second stream came from Geneva and John Calvin, a tradition known best today through the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* and all too often identified as the exclusive Reformed tradition. The third stemmed from Zurich, where Zwingli had discovered the evangel and where he was followed by Bullinger, one of the most influential figures of the sixteenth century. It has been said that the Catechism's "spirit . . . combines the intimacy of Luther, the charity of Melanchthon, and the fire of Calvin."

Non-dogmatic and Non-sectarian

We have said that the ecumenical character of the Heidelberg Catechism can be seen in the wide variety of influences that went into its composition. But there is another reason for calling it the most ecumenical confession of the Reformation, and this one is of

great significance to the Church today. It is remarkably free from dogmatic definition and, except for the mooted question 80, is singularly non-sectarian in character. No attempt is made, for example, to work out a logical and dogmatic doctrine of double predestination. This freedom from definition, however, led to lacunae, the most glaring being the Catechism's weakness in eschatology; nevertheless the Catechism is content to be a sign-post, pointing the reader back to Holy Scripture, and not to become a substitute for Scripture. Other confessional standards have attempted too much, have sought to set down in detail a full theological system, but Heidelberg lets the Bible speak and does not seek to replace it.

Its order is patterned after the Epistle to the Romans. The first two questions, "What is your only comfort, in life and in death?," and "How many things must you know that you may live and die in the blessedness of this comfort?," are introductory. Questions 3 through 11 treat of man's sin and guilt, questions 12 through 85 tell of the grace of God in Jesus Christ, and questions 86 through 129 deal with the Christian life where the dominant note is that of thanksgiving.

The Catechism's ecumenical character is further seen in its wide-spread use. It won immediate acceptance not only in Calvinist churches in Germany but in many other nations, thus evidencing its ability to speak to the religious needs of man. It won the approval of the Synod of Dort and was printed in English and appointed for use in the Church of Scotland. Today it is the basis of catechetical preaching and teaching in Hungarian Reformed Churches in at least seven nations, and is treasured by the descendants of the German and Dutch Reformations.

Warm Personal Emphasis

A second distinguishing feature of the Heidelberg Catechism is seen in its soteriological emphasis, which gives it a warm, personal character that is "properly religious." This is clear from the very first question, which sets the tone of the document: "What is your only comfort, in life and in death?" The answer is unforgettable: "That I belong, body and soul, in life and in death, not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ, who at the cost of his own blood has fully paid for all my sins and has completely freed me from the dominion of the devil; that he protects me so well that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, that everything must fit his purpose for my salvation. Therefore, by his Holy Spirit, he also assures me of eternal life, and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him."

The first thing to be noted is the Trinitarian character of the answer. I belong to Christ who has saved me; all things depend on the will of my Father, whose purpose is saving; by the Holy Spirit I have assurance, which is the basis of the Christian life. Here is piety that is not pietistic, an emphasis on inwardness that does not succumb to mere subjectivity.

It is illuminating to compare this question with the first question of the *Shorter Catechism*, for both questions determine the character of what follows in the two catechisms. "What is the chief end of man?" is answered by turning man away from himself, his needs, and the satisfaction of his own desires. "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever." Here is a statement that is theological, while the Heidelberg's answer is evangelical. Westminster is intent on unveiling the splendor of the divine majesty, while Heidelberg is interested in the believer's condition in life and in death. But such an evangelical interest does not end in Christology's being swallowed up in soteriology, as noted above, for the very nature of the redemption wrought by the Triune God precludes this.

The same evangelical interest can also be seen in question 21, "What is true faith?" and in its answer: "It is not only a certain knowledge by which I accept as true all that God has revealed to us in his Word, but also a wholehearted trust which the Holy Spirit creates in me through the gospel, that, not only to others, but to me also God has given the forgiveness of sins, everlasting righteousness and salvation, out of sheer grace solely for the sake of Christ's saving work."

Devotion and Instruction

Once again the Trinitarian nature of the faith is clear as the language of devotion and the language of instruction are blended into a single vocabulary. It is unfortunate that in subsequent generations the two were separated, to the detriment of both theology and piety. Theology became more and more objective, produced systems of doctrines that were more logical than Biblical, and faith came to be equated with intellectual assent to doctrinal propositions. Piety, on the other hand, tended increasingly to subjectivism, became anti-intellectual, non-theological, and dissolved into sentimentalism. The evils of this separation are still with us today, producing two strata that run through nearly every communion in America. Both claim to be authentic representatives of the historic faith, but each can be said to have only half a faith.

One more example will suffice to illustrate how theology and piety are held together, and this is in the answer to question 26, "What do you believe when you say: 'I believe in God the Father

Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth?": "That the eternal Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who out of nothing created heaven and earth with all that is in them, who also upholds and governs them by his eternal counsel and providence, is for the sake of Christ his Son my God and my Father. I trust in him so completely that I have no doubt that he will provide me with all things necessary for body and soul. Moreover, whatever evil he sends upon me in this troubled life he will turn to my good, for he is able to do it, being Almighty God, and is determined to do it, being a faithful Father." The answer is at once Christocentric and personal. The God of creation and the God of redemption are one. The creator of heaven and earth is my God and my Father. Is there any wonder, with a faith like this, that the children of the Heidelberg Catechism have been able to stand firm against odds almost insuperable, to sustain persecution, to be uprooted and driven out of their own lands and from their own people, and still to bear witness to him who is "Almighty God . . . a faithful Father."

Potential Basis for Christian Union

The third distinguishing feature of the Heidelberg Catechism is to be found in its catholicity. Here reference is made to the breadth of its theological base. We have said that sectarianism is absent from this document; it is not self-consciously Calvinistic. This mark of catholicity is clear in the response to question 22, "What, then, must a Christian believe?" "All that is promised us in the gospel, which the articles of our catholic, undoubted Christian faith teach us in summary form." Then follows in the next several questions the text of the most ecumenical confession in Christendom, the Apostles' Creed, its tripartite division, and an explanation of Christian doctrine based on this Creed.

The recent proposal that four communions in the United States, including the United Church of Christ and the United Presbyterian Church, work toward the formation of a church that would be truly catholic, truly reformed, and truly evangelical should surprise no one who is familiar with the history of American Protestantism, for more than a century ago the Mercersburg theologians, John W. Nevin and Philip Schaff, inspired by the theology of the Heidelberg Catechism, were writing about reformed catholicism and evangelical catholicism. They could appreciate the catholicity of a tradition that had not been through the wringer of Puritanism, with its low churchmanship, excessive individualism, improvised worship, and emptied sacraments. Philip Schaff saw clearly that something happened both to Rome and to Protestantism in the sixteenth century as each attempted to definite its position. In each case the definition tended to be negative. At Trent the

Roman Catholic Church formed its decrees against the doctrines of the Reformation, while the Reformation doctrines had been drawn up against the unscriptural superstitions of Rome, with the result that both traditions have come down to the twentieth century doctrinally impaired and impoverished.

The address which Philip Schaff delivered before the First General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed and Presbyterian Churches in Edinburgh in 1877, was a learned and eloquent plea for the Reformed tradition to undertake immediately a redress of this imbalance. I agree with Professor James Hastings Nichols' high appraisal of the Mercersburg theology in his recent volume, *Romanticism in American Theology*, and am convinced that in many areas it represents much more adequately the catholicity of the Reformed faith than did the position of its opponents, who at the time seemed to carry the day.

The Holy Catholic Church

Moreover, the catholicity of the Heidelberg Catechism will be a strong stimulus toward the realization of the fullness of this tradition. Listen to question 54, "What do you believe concerning 'the Holy Catholic Church?'" and to its answer: "I believe that, from the beginning to the end of the world, and from among the whole human race, the Son of God, by his Spirit and his Word, gathers, protects, and preserves for himself, in the unity of the true faith, a congregation chosen for eternal life. Moreover, I believe that I am and forever will remain a living member of it."

It is this conception of catholicity, under which unity, sanctity, and apostolicity are subsumed, that must become a living reality in the life of the church today. And this is a task that remains to be done. Religion in America is still too much of a frontier phenomenon, clubby but not churchly, noisy but not worshipful, pragmatic but not theological. Our greatest challenge in this generation, with our churches still filled and interest in religion still widespread, is educational, the re-education of entire communions in the nature of a faith that is catholic, reformed, and evangelical. It is a job that has hardly been begun, and it will not be done properly if the diet of congregations continues to be only the self-help homilies that are passed off as sermons. Is it beyond reason to ask if the Heidelberg Catechism might not again become the basis for catechetical preaching and teaching, for the building up of the faithful in the faith? At the very least, it would assure content and would shield the minister from his own subjectivity.

Professor Thomas F. Torrance has reminded us that "one of the outstanding features of the Catechism relates to the fact that it was published as an integral part of the Church Ordinances, being

given its place between the formulary for Holy Baptism and that for Holy Communion." This location means, Professor Torrance concludes, "that faith and order, doctrine and worship, were intentionally held together in unity, with the result that if the Catechism supplies the norm for the life and liturgy of the Church, it is no less true that its doctrinal instruction cannot be divorced from the daily worship of the Community."

Morality Rooted in Thankfulness

This unity of doctrine and worship, faith and life, characterizes the last section of the Catechism, questions 86 through 129. While the questions deal with the Ten Commandments and the Lord's Prayer, the motif throughout is thankfulness. The Christian life produces the eucharistic man, one who is humbly grateful for God's bounty by which he lives and who humbly seeks more and more to be conformed to the image of God. Question 115 asks, "Why, then, does God have the ten commandments preached so strictly since no one can keep them in this life?" and answers, "First, that all our life long we may become increasingly aware of our sinfulness, and therefore more eagerly seek forgiveness of sins and righteousness in Christ. Second, that we may consciously and diligently pray to God for the grace of the Holy Spirit, so that more and more we may be renewed in the image of God, until we attain the goal of full perfection after this life."

It would be difficult to convince Reformed Christians in the tradition of this Catechism that Protestantism's emphasis on justification by faith has led to the neglect of sanctification or Christian growth. On the contrary, the whole of the presentation culminates in the Christian life, just as in the Epistle to the Romans the whole of the Apostle's argument reaches its climax in Chapter 12, verse 1: "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service." Heidelberg's emphasis, like Paul's, is on 'becoming.'

The question is not one of just being a Christian; it is how do I become more and more a Christian, how do I take on more and more the image of him who is "the mirror of mankind." This is the type of Christian life and character the Heidelberg Catechism has produced for four hundred years, and my fervent hope is that the observance of its Quarto-centenary will be the occasion for renewed dedication to this sort of sturdy faith that is always "in order to goodness" and that is never content until no longer do we "see through a glass, darkly, but then face to face."

Two Centuries of Education

The dream and venture of education at Ursinus College go back two centuries to a primitive log schoolhouse. That ancient building was razed in 1832 when *Todd's School*, named after Andrew Todd who donated the tract of land on which it was built, was opened "for the use of the neighborhood and its vicinity." The town was then known as Perkiomen Bridge, now Collegeville.

In 1848 *Freeland Seminary*, a school for the higher education of young men, was established on land adjacent to the Todd's School tract; and over the next twenty years many hundreds of young men from Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Maryland and Delaware attended Freeland Seminary.

Three years later, on October 27, 1851, the *Montgomery Female Seminary*, claimed by some to have been "the first female college in the U.S.A.," was opened in the Fetterolf House which is still being used by Ursinus College as a residence hall for men. This school was chartered by the Pennsylvania Legislature on April 6, 1853, as the *Pennsylvania Female College*, and by 1870 "at least 999 young women" had studied in the college and its preparatory department. Its work continued until the late 1870's, and for the decade of their co-existence Ursinus and Pennsylvania Female College had interlocking faculties and directorates.

The 1860's brought a sharpening of convictions in the old German Reformed Church on matters of doctrine, worship, and church government. This produced among its many fruits a desire on the part of some pastors and laymen to found a college "where the youth of the land can be liberally educated under the benign influence of Christianity."

Ursinus College was chartered by the Pennsylvania Legislature on February 5, 1869, and, after the purchase of the former Freeland Seminary buildings, opened its doors for the reception of students on Tuesday, September 6, 1870. Approximately forty students were enrolled that first day. By the end of the year a total of 119 had been in attendance.

As amended in more recent years, in language believed to be fully consistent with the aim of the founders, Article I of the Constitution of Ursinus College states its Purpose and Principles as follows:

"Section 1. The purpose of the Board of Directors of Ursinus College is to provide and maintain an institution where youth can be liberally educated in accordance with Christian principles.

"Section 2. The religious and moral principles of Ursinus College shall always be those of the evangelical protestant church, in essential historical harmony with the principles represented by him whose distinguished name the College bears.

"Section 3. No student who is willing to comply with the rules and regulations of the College shall be excluded from its privileges on account of his race or his religion."

NOTE: The shield-mounted seal in the college colors, red, old gold, and black, reproduced on the cover of this folder, is a gift to the College from the Class of 1913 and was designed and created by Ellwood S. Paisley, a member of that Class and of the Board of Directors of the College. The original hangs above the circulation desk in the Alumni Memorial Library.



FREELAND HALL, erected in 1848, is the oldest building on the campus of Ursinus College. Its white-pillared facade, visible to the left of Bomberger Hall, has been a familiar sight to many generations of Ursinus students.

BOMBERGER MEMORIAL HALL, erected in 1891, was named in honor of the Rev. Dr. John H. A. Bomberger, first president and one of the founders of Ursinus College. At present it houses the chapel, twelve classrooms, six conference rooms, a seminar room, two music studios, two studies for day students, a recreation room, the student lounge, and several administrative offices. The chapel's seating capacity of 486 accommodates less than half of the present enrollment. This necessitates the division of the student body for daily chapel: freshmen and sophomores on Monday, Wednesday and Friday; juniors and seniors on Tuesday and Thursday. A new chapel is high on the list of priority needs in the centennial decade of Ursinus College.