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An Introduction to the Heidelberg Catechism

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Eberhard Busch and Shirley C. Guthrie (†)

through whose ministry in church and academy the comfort of the Gospel has been brought to light time and again.

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1. Learning By Heart. Encountering the Heidelberg Catechism

Encounters

Even though it happened more than thirty years ago, I still vividly remember my first encounter with the Heidelberg Catechism. During our three years of weekly confirmation classes in a small-town, rather traditional Reformed congregation in Northern Germany, we had to memorize more than half of its 129 questions and answers, and, to put it mildly, we did not like it much. The questions were hard to memorize, and most of them did not, if truth be told, make any sense to us teenagers. Memorizing them was a boring duty, something you simply had to do in order to pass the confirmation exam. The Heidelberg Catechism, one of the most affectionate confessional documents not only of the Reformed, but of the entire Christian, tradition, did not touch our hearts. But that rather indifferent attitude towards the Heidelberg Catechism changed considerably when our pastor, in an attempt to bring the catechism to life, told us several stories about how people actually experienced comfort and joy through it during difficult periods of their lives, how fundamentally influential particularly the first question had been and still was to many people in the Reformed tradition, and how the catechism was for them so much more than just a schoolbook. We were surprised to learn that even people suffering from dementia regained some sort of focused consciousness for a short time while listening to parts of the Heidelberg Catechism. People on their deathbed frequently asked the pastor to pray with them either Psalm 23 or – the first question of the Heidelberg Catechism. Clearly, this text had touched *their* hearts and minds in a way we could not quite comprehend. The Heidelberg Catechism did not become our favorite book overnight, but we began to understand that it may talk to us in different ways at different times, and that it actually may have a connection to our own lives as well. We began to understand that truly encountering

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the Heidelberg Catechism is not about memorizing passages from an antiquated textbook for confirmation exams, but about learning with it and from it who God is for us – and who we are as those belonging to God.

This year, all over the world Reformed churches, scholars, ministers, and lay people celebrate the 450th anniversary of the Heidelberg Catechism, one of the most influential and widely used Christian books throughout the course of history and on all continents. As such, the catechism with its affectionate piety and doctrinal lucidity constitutes one of the principal testimonies of faith not only as a Reformed Confession, but as the property of the entire Protestant Reformation. For a great number of churches of the Reformed tradition, the Heidelberg Catechism is not only a vital part of their confessional heritage and doctrinal standards, but a living witness in catechesis, liturgy, preaching, devotion, and Christian living. They welcome the opportunity to not only commemorate a historical, if basically outdated document, but to listen anew to this voice from the past and learn from and with it, not only with their minds but also with their hearts. The English expression "learning by heart" could have been invented in order to describe the kind of learning the Heidelberg Catechism envisioned, where feelings and intellect are not separated, where the lessons become part of the person's living and lived knowledge, containing affective as well cognitive elements. This expression, based on the ancient Greek understanding of the heart as the seat of intelligence, memory, and emotion, captures in a rather remarkable way the purpose and aim of the Heidelberg Catechism: to engage the intellectual as well as emotional faculties of each believer in order to enable them to give an account of their faith *and* to experience the comfort of God's grace. In short, to apply the gospel message to their own lives in all dimensions, to learn Jesus Christ by heart. This understanding of faith as "sure knowledge and wholehearted trust" (question 21), which forms the basis of the whole catechism, is a gift the Heidelberg Catechism offered to its first audience and is still offering to us today. Encountering the Heidelberg Catechism today, then, invites us to share in this learning by heart.

Most contemporary Reformed Christians probably encounter the Heidelberg Catechism primarily in confirmation classes, Sunday

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schools or in the liturgy of worship services, though this actually varies quite a bit from church to church and congregation to congregation. The catechism was designed, though, with an even broader perspective in mind, to which we now turn.

Catechetical Textbook – Confessional Standard – Lectionary – Liturgical Element – House- and Prayerbook – Guide to Christian Living

In working through the Heidelberg Catechism and its origins, we will discover how applicable it was in different areas of church life, which may have been one of the central factors contributing to its enduring success in churches of the Reformed tradition. From the beginning, the authors of the catechism envisioned a document that would not serve only catechetical purposes in teaching children and youth but a book of Christian faith usable in different areas of church life as well as in the personal life of faith. Chapter 2 will provide us with a brief historical overlook of the origin of the Heidelberg Catechism; it might be helpful, though, to notice already here that the catechism was drafted not as a stand-alone document of Christian faith as conceived from a Reformation perspective, but as a part of a new *church order.* As such, it was placed in between the sections of the church order dealing with Baptism and the Lord's Supper, thus providing a sort of linkage, "a path of instruction" (Wim Verboom) guiding the baptized believer from his or her baptism as an infant (which was the rule in those days) towards participation in the Lord's Supper as a mature and responsible believer, entering into the communication of faith as an educated and knowledgeable believer. In order to enable and empower each believer and the Christian community as a whole to become conversant with Christian faith, its teachings as well as its practical implications for Christian life, the Heidelberg Catechism was designed with at least five purposes in mind, at which we will briefly look at below.

a) The catechetical purpose: The word catechism derives from the Greek term for teaching, originally denoting oral teaching, and thus describing more an event between teacher and pupils than a schoolbook. This aspect is kept in the question-answer-form, which is till

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now characteristic for catechisms. In the ancient church, catechetical teaching was used to teach the adult believers *before* their baptism, preparing them for making their confession to Christ. The most important catechetical material consistently was composed of four major parts: the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer, the Sacraments, and the Ten Commandments. When infant baptism became the rule, catechetical teaching became less important in church life for centuries, gaining importance again only at the beginning of the 16th century. The pre-Reformation movement of the Bohemian Brothers, following the reformer Jan Hus, developed its "Questions for Children" in 1502 and thereby started off a flood of new catechisms. Reformation movements all over Germany and Europe began to produce catechisms in astonishingly great numbers, reflecting the emphasis on teaching all believers the contents and implications of Christian faith as understood by the Reformation. The invention of printing and the humanist school reform made the dissemination of religious subject matters possible to an unprecedented extent. The most notable and influential catechisms from the Lutheran reformation are, without a doubt, Luther's Small and Large Catechism written in 1529, which superseded all other catechisms. The Reformed branch of the Reformation also produced a great number of catechisms with differing influence and in various regions, among them the Zurich Catechism (1534), Calvin's Genevan Catechism (1542), the Emden Catechism (1554), and as a latecomer the Smaller and Larger Westminster Catechisms (1649). In this broad field of Reformed and Reformation catechisms, the Heidelberg Catechism certainly occupies a prominent position, not least so because of its worldwide use throughout the centuries as a textbook and teaching aid within the church, but also in school and even universities and seminaries.

b) The confessional purpose: In times of doctrinal controversies, which threatened to split the church, not only in the Palatinate where the Heidelberg Catechism originated, but all over Germany and even throughout the rest of Europe, the Heidelberg Catechism was designed also as a creedal statement in the sense of a doctrinal standard to establish firm doctrinal ground for the proclamation of the gospel. As we will later see, the authors of the Heidelberg Catechism sought to define this ground as a kind of common, mediat-

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ing ground between the different camps of Lutheran and Reformed churches and theologians, though without resounding success in this matter. The Heidelberg Catechism later came to be included into many church orders all over Europe, as a guide and test for doctrinally sound teaching, preaching, and church life. Its inclusion into the three so-called *Documents of Unity* by the famous Synod of Dort (1618/19) would especially lead to its confessional character in churches all over the world from the Netherlands, to South Africa, Asia, and North America.

c) The homiletical and liturgical purpose: The fourth edition of the Heidelberg Catechism from 1563 was sub-divided into 52 sections, the so-called 52 Lord's Days. With the Heidelberg Catechism, the new church order of the Palatinate developed an additional church service on Sunday afternoons called "catechism service" in which the Heidelberg Catechism served as a kind of consecutive lectionary in providing with its 52 sections the texts for the so-called "catechetical sermons" or "catechism preaching", a rather didactic form of preaching and teaching. Thus the congregation would be lead through the whole catechism once each year. Even though this practice of catechism services has lost its influence in most Reformed churches, there are churches scattered throughout that still practice this today. In addition, the Heidelberg Catechism was sub-divided into 9 sections, which would be read during Sunday morning worship services as part of the liturgy. We also still find this practice in many Reformed churches all over the world, where the Heidelberg Catechism is considered a non-negotiable liturgical element of Sunday morning worship services. This use of the Heidelberg Catechism in preaching and liturgy reflects the catechism's own style as the preaching catechism of a worshipping community.

d) The devotional purpose: Alongside this "public" use of the Heidelberg Catechism in teaching, confessing, preaching, and liturgy, the importance of it lay without a doubt also in its use for personal piety as devotional literature. Not only the last six of its questions, which are written as a prayer addressing God directly, but all of the catechism was widely used for private devotion and edification, especially as a so-called "housebook" for families. As we have said, its warm and affectionate tone endeared it to many

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believers, becoming a prototype for later devotional literature. As a prayer book, the Heidelberg Catechism, and in particular its first question, also played a particularly helpful role in pastoral care. From the beginning, the Heidelberg Catechism was understood as a book of comfort and consolation especially for the sick and afflicted, and already in 1563 ministers in the Palatinate were advised to read the first question at believers' sick- and deathbeds.

e) The ethical purpose: Often times overlooked is the last of the uses of the Heidelberg Catechism, which we could describe as a "guide to Christian living", or "ethical guideline". From the beginning, the Heidelberg Catechism was understood as a guide not only for believing with your heart and mind, but with all of your life. As Frederick III, the so-called "father of the Heidelberg Catechism", remarked in his preface to the catechism, the Heidelberg Catechism was written explicitly with the aim "to promote peace, quiet and virtuous living among our subjects". Already in the first question, we find this ethical orientation of the believer's life when the Heidelberg Catechism confesses our only comfort in life and death as belonging to God "who makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him". In addition, the complete third part of the catechism understands the Christian life as a life of gratitude of the believer; the catechism as a summary of faith is "relentless in its applications for our style of life in the world" (Howard Hageman). Thus the Heidelberg Catechism attempts to provide throughout a form of ethical guideline for believers, always trying to illuminate practical implications of its teachings and never separating faith and life, doctrine and praxis. The 400th anniversary edition of the Heidelberg Catechism, authorized by the North American Area Council of the World Alliance of Reformed and Presbyterian Churches, captured this intention appropriately in referring to the Heidelberg Catechism in its foreword as "a handbook of practical religion".

When we now look at a few examples of the impact of this small book, these manifold uses and applications of the Heidelberg Catechism may help explain, at least partly, its lasting and widespread success.

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Small Book, Big Impact

Studying, researching, and teaching Reformed theology, in particular Reformed confessional documents, first within the German and then in an international context, I was repeatedly struck by the vitality this centuries-old text has retained for individuals as well as communities of faith within the Reformed tradition in different parts of the world. Four brief examples from Reformed churches in different contexts might help illustrate this still present influence and authority of the Heidelberg Catechism in the 20th and 21st century:

(1) One of the most important confessional documents of the 20th century is the *Theological Declaration of Barmen,* written in 1934 by the Confessing Church in Germany against the majority of Protestant churches, led by the so-called "German Christians" and aligned to the Nazi-Regime. With its first thesis following evidently the formulation of the first question of the Heidelberg Catechism, the Barmen Theological Declaration directs believers immediately to the center of the Christian faith, Jesus Christ. At the same time, the Declaration also places itself firmly and ostentatiously in the tradition of the Heidelberg Catechism, thus claiming to be the true heir of the Reformation over against the official churches. This was no coincidence or ecclesio-political move, but it came from the theological and devotional heart of this resistance movement where the Heidelberg Catechism played a central role in these congregations and for the movement's leading figures. One illuminating example of countless others is the story of Paul Schneider, a Reformed pastor and martyr. The Heidelberg Catechism proved to be an essential force for his resistance against German Christians in preaching, teaching, church discipline, and especially in his personal piety. Together with the presbytery, he had excommunicated two local Nazis from his congregation with reference to the understanding of church discipline in the Heidelberg Catechism and refused unwaveringly to give in to pressure from the Nazi regime. When he was subsequently imprisoned in 1937, he asked his wife to send him the Heidelberg Catechism to the prison so that he might study and be comforted by it. After he was martyred by the Nazis in the concentration camp of Buchenwald in 1939, he was commemorated in his funeral address by relating quotes from the

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Heidelberg Catechism to certain events in his life, with question 1 at the theological heart of the commemoration.

(2) Fifty years later in a completely different context, the Heidelberg Catechism played a decisive role in yet another resistance movement and confessional development: the struggle against the theological justification of apartheid in South Africa. As part of the confessional heritage of the *Dutch Reformed Mission Church* (today forming the *Uniting Reformed Churches in Southern Africa* together with the *Dutch Reformed Church*), the Heidelberg Catechism helped facilitate a strong Reformed criticism of the apartheid system and theology in church and state. In particular, the Heidelberg Catechism's understanding of the nature of the church as a community called by God from the *entire human family* (question 54) encouraged and supported a new or rather re-newed ecclesiological vision over against the oppressive and ultimately heretical status quo in Apartheid South Africa, manifesting itself in the now famous Belhar Confession of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church from 1982. In quoting the Heidelberg Catechism directly at central junctions and thus reclaiming the Reformed heritage, the Belhar Confession confesses in Article 1 and 2, respectively: "We believe in the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, *who gathers, protects and cares for his Church by his Word and Spirit, as He has done since the beginning of the world and will do to the end. …* We believe in one holy, universal Christian church, *the communion of saints called from the entire human family.*" Although these formulations may sound rather unspectacular in our ears, they did indeed help develop a theological (and political) courage, comfort and assertiveness, which sustained many believers in their struggles and fights for a church and state without racial separation and discrimination. This language may still have an impact on many contemporary churches in North America and other continents concerning their various own struggles with racism and discrimination; especially since a number of churches from the Reformed and Presbyterian tradition, such as the Reformed Church in America, the Christian Reformed Church in America, and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) either adopted the Belhar Confession in various ways or are considering adopting it, *and* count the Heidelberg Catechism among one of their confessional standards.

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(3) At roughly the same time as the Belhar Confession, the *Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.),* the new church body that came out of the union between the *Presbyterian Church in the United States* and the *United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America,* called for a new common confession that came to be named the Brief Statement of Faith (1983). The Brief Statement, representing a contemporary confession of Christian faith, including the major themes of the Reformed tradition, was deeply influenced by the theology of the Heidelberg Catechism. Not only do we find cross-references to almost all of the 129 of the Heidelberg Catechism's questions throughout the whole Statement, indicating an intimate theological relatedness to its confessional ancestor, we also encounter in its opening line, setting the tone for all that is to follow, an almost direct quotation from the Heidelberg Catechism's famous first question. The answer to this question asking about the only comfort of the believer in life and death provides us with a sort of summary of the central message of the gospel: we belong to God. That is what Christian faith is about; that is what the Heidelberg Catechism had brought up to light in the 16th century, and that is what is at the heart of Christian faith to this day. Though more than 400 years old, the Heidelberg Catechism assisted in facilitating a contemporary confession for a church that could not differ more from the church of its origins. The enduring relevance of the Heidelberg Catechism for churches in the United States stemming from the Reformed tradition is also highlighted by the recently produced new translation, which was prepared by a committee with members from *three* denominations, the *Christian Reformed Church in North America,* the *Reformed Church in America,* and the already mentioned *Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).* As a product of intense ecumenical collaboration, this new translation of the Heidelberg Catechism is envisioned to function as a confessional bridge between three churches – a vision that would surely obtain approval from the authors of the Heidelberg Catechism.

(4) Moving to yet another continent, we find a different and rather exceptional approach in appropriating the Heidelberg Catechism for a church in the 21st century. The *Christian Church from North Central Java* (Indonesia), the *GKJTU,* founded in 1937 and originating from missionary efforts of two interdenominationally working

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agencies from the Netherlands and Germany (who deliberately did not impose a confession of faith on this new church), decided in 1988 to accept the Heidelberg Catechism as its creed. With accepting this particular confession, the church defined its own identity as "Calvinist-pietistic-contextual", or simply "reformational". Unlike other Asian Reformed churches, the GJKTU did not formulate a new creed as a faithful response to contemporary and contextual challenges, but considered the Heidelberg Catechism as comprising "the basic teaching for the reformational churches throughout all the ages", "the summary of the Holy Scriptures and the basic doctrine of the GKJTU" and thus not open to revision or substitution. Yet in order to help believers facing the "many problems and struggles in their day to day life", the GKJTU adopted in 2008 a small booklet as a "Supplement to the Heidelberg Catechism", with its complete title displaying the challenging contemporary issues it addresses: "The teaching of the GKJTU on Culture, Religious Plurality and Denominational Variety, Politics, Economy as well as on Science, Arts, and Technology". Written in a simple language, it is supposed to be used – very much like the Heidelberg Catechism – not only in confirmation classes, but also in the wider context of the church's life, in preaching, liturgy, church and parish media, and Bible study groups. Modeled after the Heidelberg Catechism, the supplement applies the Question – Answer – Scriptural citations design, and uses a great number of cross-references in order to closely link these two documents of faith. Reading through this document, one is impressed by the efforts of an Indonesian church in the 21st century to appropriate its own confessional heritage in a faithful, yet contemporary and contextual way, in conversation with a document from 16th century Europe.

These four examples out of countless others might give us just a first idea of the vitality and influence of this 450-year-old textbook from a small German territory on the Upper Rhine, and the role it plays as one of the strongest ecumenical bonds of Reformed churches worldwide.

We should not overlook the fact, though, that the Heidelberg Catechism also left a trace of spiritual repression and domination, of cultural and religious imperialism in several countries, societies,

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and churches on which it was imposed not only as a document of faith, but also as a form of a "colonizing book" by which the "natives" were not only to be converted to Christian faith in a rather narrow confessional way, but also supposed to be "civilized". It may not come as a surprise, then, that after becoming independent, several churches actually formulated new creeds and confessions replacing those they had inherited from European churches, including the Heidelberg Catechism.

In addition, the Heidelberg Catechism has left its imprint not only on confessional documents and developments of Reformed churches worldwide, but also in the religious lives of countless individuals, and we find marks of this impact in numerous personal testimonies throughout the centuries – positive as well as negative ones. While the Heidelberg Catechism brings to light the comfort of the gospel in a "joyful, thankful, free, personal way" (Shirley Guthrie) for many, there are others who experienced it as "wooden and bloodless" (Gottfried Keller, a famous 19th century writer from Switzerland). While it enabled generations of believers to actively and responsibly participate in the communication of their faith, at times it was misused as a spiritless and restrictive instrument that turned the believers into passive recipients of a deposit of doctrinal truth, bringing about enforced doctrinal conformity, even denunciation and exclusion of those who dared to think "unorthodox" thoughts, creating a rigid defense of confessional and theological narrow-mindedness, which frequently resulted in indifference or outright rejection by many laypeople as well as theologians or pastors in Reformed churches. The Heidelberg Catechism, despite its undeniable and extraordinary success throughout centuries and all over the world, remains, just like all human writings, ambiguous in the hands of its readers and teachers. Alongside its success story, we also find stories of boredom, stuffiness, pain, and even repression inflicted by an uninspired or oppressive teaching of the Heidelberg Catechism.

The Heidelberg Catechism has also been criticized extensively, rightly or wrongly so needs to be decided in each case, for a supposedly individualistic perspective and anthropocentrism (focusing on humanity on the expense of the rest of creation), for its teaching of an angry God who demands satisfaction and chooses only a limited

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group for salvation, for its exclusively male language and imagery, and for a plenitude of other reasons which seem incompatible with theological and exegetical insights gained over the past centuries. At the same time, it has been praised as "a remarkably warm-hearted and personalized confession of faith, eminently deserving of its popularity among Reformed churches to the present day", as the Christian Reformed Church in North America formulates in its introduction of the Heidelberg Catechism. Of course, 21st century Christians may have and indeed should have many questions to ask this text from the 16th century, and may find some of its teachings debatable, incomprehensible, outdated, or even unbiblical. Before we can enter into a conversation with it and give voice to our criticism *or* consent, however, we should at least begin with listening to it carefully and trying to understand the catechism in its context. Consequently, this *Introduction to the Heidelberg Catechism* tries to listen carefully to this significant voice of the time of the Reformation in order to become acquainted with its teachings, but also in order to provide a starting point for a critical conversation with it. Yet this *Introduction* is also guided by an additional assumption that should be named right at the beginning: the Heidelberg Catechism is understood not only as an antique textbook, which we could read as impartial and objective readers, but as a book that constantly challenges us to ponder the age old and ever new question: "But why are you called a Christian?" As a witness to God's grace in Jesus Christ, it invites us to be drawn into the catechism's conversation of faith as partners in an ongoing dialogue on our only comfort in life and death.

The 450th anniversary of the Heidelberg Catechism provides us with an opportunity to open this book of Christian teaching once again, or maybe for the first time, encountering it not only as a historical document, but as a living testimony of faith. In maintaining with the famous Swiss theologian, Karl Barth, that the Heidelberg Catechism "deserves at least respectful hearing", this *Introduction to the Heidelberg Catechism* intends to help facilitating a first or recurrent listening to one of the milestones of Christian literature in introducing its historical background (chapter 2), its theological composition (chapter 3), as well as its main theological themes in a brief commentary on its 129 questions (chapter 4).

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2. Disputes, Doctrines, and Decisions. The Historical and Theological Background of the Heidelberg Catechism

Like most of the major Reformation confessions of the 16th century, the Heidelberg Catechism is the result of a host of different and complex issues with theological as well as political roots. Consequently, the Heidelberg Catechism needs to be seen and understood in its specific context, if we really want to get an idea of the depth and profundity of it. For even though the catechism turned out to be one of the most enduring and inspiring texts of the Reformation throughout the centuries and around the world, it does, obviously, have a quite particular context, to which we will turn now for a brief account of its historical circumstances and of its reception throughout the following centuries.

The catechism originated in the German city of Heidelberg in 1563 in response to various doctrinal disputes with enormous political implications, involving an impressive number of academic and pastoral theologians, officials, statesmen, and other concerned parties. As a "late fruit on the tree of Reformation" (Eberhard Busch), the Heidelberg Catechism is at the same time the product of already more than 40 years of Protestant Reformation not only in Germany but all over Europe, and a bridge into the age of Protestant Orthodoxy. Concentrating on a few of the major players and disputes, we will review briefly the history of the origin of the Heidelberg Catechism with broad strokes, beginning with Frederick III, the so-called "Father of the Heidelberg Catechism", and one of the "unsung heroes" of the Reformation (John Hesselink).

Frederick, the Pious and the Palatine Reformation

Even before ascending the throne of the Palatine Electorate, a small territory located at both sides of the upper Rhine and one of the seven great principalities of the Holy Roman Empire at that time, Frederick III (1515–1576) demonstrated an extraordinary interest in

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theological arguments and discussions as well as a profound personal piety; he later became known as Frederick "the Pious". Born in 1515 (two years before the German monk Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg and started what later became known as the Protestant Reformation), Frederick and his life could serve as a symbol of the religious turmoil of those days. As a descendant of the noble House of Wittelsbach, Frederick was raised and educated at the courts and universities of Nancy, Liège, and Brussels as a strict adherent to the Roman Catholic faith. At the age of 22, he married the 18-year-old princess Marie of Brandenburg-Kulmbach. Unlike many other marriages of their time, theirs seems to have been a truly happy and intimate one. Even though we do not know a great deal about Marie, she appears to have been an intelligent and gifted woman, well-known for her thorough knowledge of the Bible due to her education, which was, in contrast to her husband's, firmly based on the new Lutheran teachings. Years of theological discussion, especially with his wife Marie, and long hours of bible study convinced Frederick to leave the Roman Catholic church and to become a follower of the Reformation movement; in 1546 he publicly professed his Lutheran faith. But that profession did not end his theological studies. Much to the displeasure of his wife, who remained an ardent Lutheran to her death ("I have learned one [the Lutheran] catechism, and I will adhere to it!"), Frederick became interested in the theology of the Reformed branch of the Protestant Reformation, which was inaugurated mainly by Swiss and French reformers such as Zwingli, Bucer, Bullinger, and especially by John Calvin in Geneva. All over Germany, however, theologians of the different branches of the Reformation were in serious dispute with each other over theological doctrines, spending a vast amount of time and energy in repudiating dissenting opinions, even condemning the other side as heretical. The Reformation had clearly entered a crucial stage: the hard-won doctrinal truths of this renewal movement had to be established, the danger of a sectarian splintering of the Reformation had to be averted, and, most important of all, the laypeople had to be taught how to live the Protestant faith.

When Frederick III ascended to the throne in Heidelberg in 1559, he found there complicated and difficult circumstances fraught with

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all sorts of theological controversies and tensions going back to the early 1520s. At that time, Reformation ideas had entered the Electoral Palatinate, in sermons as well as in academic lectures, and had started a sort of popular Reformation movement "from below", initially without official support from the authorities. Due to the rather erratic course of sometimes tolerating Lutheran reforms in his land, sometimes defending Roman Catholic positions, Frederick's pre-predecessor (Frederick II) had created the odd and very unstable situation of one land undecided between two confessions for more than two decades. Only in 1546, the Lutheran Reformation was legally introduced into the Palatinate by the authorities, consenting with an apparent public desire for reformation. No more than two years later, though, all Protestant territories were forced, by the imperial order of Charles V, to return to the Roman Catholic order. The Palatinate did not constitute an exception: the Reformation was officially revoked, even though no real changes in the staffing of influential administrational and ecclesial positions occurred. Protestant Reformation went, in a manner of speaking, dormant for almost a decade in Heidelberg, until the so-called Religious Peace of Augsburg in 1555 was established, which officially brought the religious conflicts between Roman Catholicism and Lutheranism to an end, giving all states' princes of the Holy Roman Empire permission to choose for them and their domain either Catholicism or Lutheranism as the official religion. The legal status of Reformed territories, though, remained vague and precarious, since the Peace of Augsburg explicitly applied only to those Protestant territories adhering to the Lutheran Augsburg Confession. Frederick's formally Lutheran-minded predecessor, Otto Henry (who also was privately in contact with Bullinger, Zwingli's successor in Zurich!), had subsequently reintroduced the Lutheran confession in 1556, and called a rather diverse group of prominent Protestant scholars (strict and mild Lutherans, Calvinists and Zwinglians) to the faculties of the renowned and almost 500-year-old University of Heidelberg. Reflecting the virulent inner-Protestant tensions at the time, these scholars almost immediately started to quarrel with each other over theological issues, arising especially out of the much-discussed issue of the Lord's Supper. Consequently, the pulpits of the University of

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Heidelberg and of its many churches turned into the battleground of some sort of "pulpit war" over the correct understanding of the modality of Christ's presence in the Eucharist. In addition, since the Reformation had not been implemented thoroughly in all regions of the Palatinate, the population was confused and upset, the parishes lacking qualified guidance by educated ministers. In short, the state of affairs in Heidelberg and the Palatinate was a mess in many respects and desperately needed to be straightened up in order to restore public peace in church and state.

Doctrinal Disputes over the Lord's Supper

Before continuing with the progress of events in Heidelberg, we need to pause for a moment in order to give some attention to the theological discussions at hand: What exactly were those opposing Protestant camps in Heidelberg, the Palatinate, all over Germany, and in many other parts of Europe fighting about? What confessional controversies led them to wage a doctrinal war against each other to the extent that they were actually endangering all that had been accomplished by the Reformation movement before? As mentioned earlier, at the center of these disputes stood differing views on Christ's presence in the Eucharist, constituting the key point of difference between Reformed and Lutheran theologies not only for the 16th century, but for centuries to come. The central question turned out to be how to understand Christ's words "This is my body" [Mt 26:26] at the Last Supper, or, to be more specific, how the signs (bread and wine) are related to what is signified (Christ's Body and Blood/forgiveness of sins). A brief, and thus necessarily oversimplifying, outline of the different positions on that issue may be useful:

- The Roman Catholic Church interpreted those words of Christ quite literally: even though the communicants still see and taste bread and wine in the Eucharist, the substance of it actually has been transformed into the substance of Christ's Body and Blood; the communicants truly receive Christ's Body and Blood. The signs have been changed or transubstantiated into the things signified; this understanding is accordingly known as the doctrine of "transubstantiation".

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- The Lutheran understanding, on the other hand, claimed that the substance of bread and wine does not change at all. The substance of Christ's Body and Blood, however, is really present, and the communicants receive them "in, with, and under" the elements of bread and wine, thus asserting a *sacramental union* (Luther) of the signs with the things signified. It is only through this sacramental union that believers receive salvation and forgiveness of sin. This doctrine is also known as "consubtantiation".
- A somewhat different, but for the Heidelberg Catechism critical position, is that of Phillip Melanchthon, Luther's collaborator, the intellectual leader of the Lutheran reformation and, at a later time, a theological counselor of Frederick III. Melanchthon had changed his position from a form of consubtantiation (in the Augsburg Confession in 1530) to a more intermediate position (in the 1540 altered edition of the Augsburg Confession), which was more agreeable to Reformed theologians by emphasizing that bread and wine are real signs of Christ's presence, which is located in the use of the meal or action of distributing the bread rather than in the element itself.
- Reformed theologians, now, did agree with all Lutherans in rejecting the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation, but did not accept the stricter Lutheran understanding of Christ's real presence "in, with, and under" the elements. To make things even more complicated, Reformed theologians advocated rather different conceptions of the issue at hand; the main thinkers followed Zwingli and Calvin:
  - The followers of Huldrych Zwingli, reformer of Zurich, supported a more symbolic view of the Eucharist: the elements of bread and wine only point the communicants to Christ's Body and Blood, signifying them without literally turning into them. Signs and things signified are strictly separated, because the Risen Christ in his humanity (and consequently his body and blood), is not to be found on earth in any kind of element, but is seated at the right hand of his Father in Heaven. Therefore, the communicants do not receive Christ's Body and Blood. The Last Supper is an act of thanksgiving for God's gift of grace. Zwingli had based this view on Lk 22:19 ("Do

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The Heidelberg Catechism is one of the world's foremost and prevailing Christian faith documents throughout the centuries, due to its intellectual clarity as well as personal style. By describing its historical background and main theological motives, the book invites the reader to bring the Heidelberg Catechism into conversation with contemporary Christian faith.
Margit Ernst-Habib aims not only at describing the traditional uses of the Heidelberg Catechism in churches so far, but also at engaging the reader on different levels, and eventually enabling him or her to begin answering the vital question: »But why are you called a Christian?«

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