



## ***The Heidelberg Catechism – a comfort for many***

### ***Old – and widely loved***

The Heidelberg Catechism (1563) is already 450 years old. And yet, even today, this document is still new and fresh – and a rich source of comfort – for many people across the world. From the beginning, it was one of the best loved confessional documents of the Reformation. It was very quickly widely accepted by believers and churches in many countries, and would gradually become known and loved worldwide.

It was initially often taken along with believers who had to flee – as a book of learning, but also as a book of comfort in their new homes. This catechism was used in many refugee congregations. It was translated into many languages. It was known on every continent – and from quite early on – from Ethiopia to South Africa, from Indonesia to Korea, from the Netherlands to the USA, everywhere.

### ***One faith – for teaching and doing***

Initially, Frederick III, the ruler of the German city of Heidelberg, wanted to ensure peace between conflicting groups in his area. Citizens – from young to old – had to be educated in this peace, in this one communal faith and love. He therefore appointed a commission to compile such a book of faith. It had to spell out the one Christian faith, so that believers, irrespective of heritage and background, would acknowledge the one gospel and live it up in his region.

Controversies had to be avoided where possible. Everyone had to be able to understand its Biblical message and hopefully acknowledge it, too. In addition, the implications of this faith for everyday life also had to be made clear.

### ***The content of these teachings***

A young lecturer at the local university, Zacharias Ursinus, who had just turned 27, would do most of the writing. Perhaps his biggest contribution was the decision to comfort the faithful with the gospel. From the first words, it becomes clear that comfort is the theme of the catechism.

Ursinus knew very well what to teach the believers – exactly what new believers have learnt throughout the

ages. After all, other such teachings were already known, and all of them always teach the same four main concerns: (1) Believers learn to trust in the gospel – as is confessed in the Apostolic Confession, for instance. (2) Believers gradually learn the sacraments of baptism and communion – for that is how the Holy Spirit works in and through us. (3) Believers learn what the will of God is – as in the Ten Commandments. (4) Believers learn to call on God in prayer – as in The Lord’s Prayer.

But how does Ursinus clarify these four concerns – confession of faith, sacraments, commandments, prayer? By showing how, together, they contribute to a deep comfort! That is what was so new and different about the Heidelberg Catechism and what would make it so popular.

### ***My only comfort – in life and death!***

- Question and Answer 1 are the best known words in the catechism. What is my only comfort in life and death? That I belong to Jesus Christ – not to myself, but with body and soul, in life and death, to Jesus Christ! He has paid for my sins, he delivers me from evil, protects the very hair on my head, lets everything work together for my good – a wonderful comfort!
- But Answer 1 says even more. Our comfort is, moreover, that Christ makes us willing, through his Holy Spirit, to live fully for him from now on. These words are of key importance. It means that it is part of our comfort that Christ himself, through his Holy Spirit, renews us and makes us willing to live for him. The thankfulness which the catechism will still mention is therefore part of the comfort, not our reaction to this comfort, but part of what Christ gives us through his Spirit.

### ***Comfort – in our misery***

- Why do we need comfort? Because of our misery, the catechism answers. Once again, a deep insight! The term “misery” or “wretchedness” (*elend* in German) has to do with the concept of an *alien, exile* or *stranger*. Our wretchedness comes from feeling not at home, like exiles or squatters. We experience alienation, people say these days, we are estranged from who or what we are actually meant to be – and that is our misery. We feel out of place. We yearn and feel the need for something more and something different.
- When do we experience this misery? Touchingly, the catechism answers: when we are reminded that we are meant to love – God and our neighbour. When we remember that love is in our nature, our calling, the type of person we could have been – and then recognise our distress in this mirror, our lack, longing, yearning, failure – in short, our misery. We are not what we could have been, we are missing something – and this knowledge saddens us.

### ***The comfort – of redemption***

In this sadness, the gospel comforts us, because Christ saves us from this misery.

- How do we receive this comfort? the catechism asks. So simple: through faith – and then Question and Answer 21 gives a description of faith that would help many towards this faith. It is knowledge and trust simultaneously – knowledge of the promises of the gospel and trust that these promises are true, not just for others, but for me also.
- Then the catechism makes it clear that faith knowledge is not mere factual knowledge, but knowledge of promises. The Apostolic Confession is construed as the content of our faith, but every time, the question is asked how this is of use to us, and what the value, meaning, and comfort is for us (Question 24 to Question 64). Creation and providence, the birth, suffering, cross, death, grave and descent of Jesus, the

resurrection, ascension, sitting at the right hand and the second coming of Jesus – every time: how does this help us, what is the use, how does this comfort us? Faith is to discover this comfort in the knowledge – and to trust that it is also meant for me. Knowledge, yes, but knowledge of promises, knowledge of grace and mercy.

- Our faith in the church is also full of promises (Answers 54 and 55) – that Christ himself protects the church through his Word and his Spirit; that we are truly part of his church and will remain so; that we all together share in all his treasures and fruits; that each of us may also apply our gifts with joy in the service of others; one promise after the other, one comforting assurance after the other.
- How do we obtain a share in this faith? Christ grants it to us through his Holy Spirit. How does he do this? Through our hearing about the promises of the gospel, yes, but then he assures us of it yet again through the sacraments, which were given specifically for this reason. In baptism and communion, it is Christ himself who seals, strengthens and assures us – and comforts us – through his Holy Spirit (Questions 65 to 85).

### ***The comfort – of gratitude***

- Then comes the last part of the catechism, about gratitude – as part of what Christ gives us through his Spirit! He makes our hearts willing to live for him, he brings forth fruits of gratitude in us (Answer 64) and renews us by his Spirit to his own image (Answer 86), he mortifies the old person in us (Answer 89) and quickens us to new life (Answer 90) – with a hearty joy, with passion and love, to live according to God’s will. What a comfort – this joy, this passion and life, also comes from Christ.
- In Question and Answer 86, all these key ideas of the catechism are united. We are redeemed from our misery by Christ, through grace alone – from the beginning to the end, all is grace, all mercy, all compassion, all freely given, and this includes even our lives of gratitude.
- What does such a life of gratitude look like? The Holy Spirit gives us a passion and a love for the law as well as for prayer, because prayer is the most important part of our gratitude. For this reason, the catechism first explains how good it is to live according to the intentions of the Ten Commandments (Question 92 to 115) and then how good it is to learn how to pray as in The Lord’s Prayer (Question 116 to 128).
- In a new, fresh way, the catechism does not focus on what the separate commandments *proscribe*, as such, but what each one *prescribes*. In this way, the Eighth Commandment does not just *proscribe* theft, but it actually *prescribes* that we help promote, wherever we can, the interests of our neighbour (Answer 111).
- With The Lord’s Prayer, the catechism also helps us to contemplate the deeper intentions. In this way, the prayer for our daily bread reminds us that God is the only source of all that is good and that all our cares and hard work will be for nothing if the Father does not bless us in it (Answer 125).
- This is ultimately the deep comfort: that we do not belong to ourselves but to Jesus Christ – through his Holy Spirit, he himself teaches us to live and pray in this way.

### ***How do we live with this comfort today?***

This comfort of the gospel, that rescues us from our misery and makes us grateful, full of joy, passion and love to live for Christ and pray to our Father, has been heard, contemplated, remembered and passed on to coming generations, throughout the centuries.

- This is the role and use of any catechism. The church cannot live without a teaching, for the good of our children and their children and down the generations. For this reason, the Heidelberg Catechism remains one of the great gifts to the church of the ages and of the whole world. Initially it was used everywhere in churches, schools and homes, in many countries.
- In schools, countless children have literally learned the alphabet, learned to spell and to read, to think and to wonder, to read the Bible and to believe, with the help of this catechism. These questions and answers have taught generations of children to ask questions and search for answers, to talk, to learn how to account for their own beliefs to themselves. Today, learned people are saying what a large role the catechism played in the formation of the modern world as we know it today.
- In congregations, believers have often learned, with the catechism's help, to listen to the Biblical message of redemption through grace alone – of Christ's mercy in our misery. In many churches, it was the custom to preach with reference to the catechism every Sunday night, so that the whole gospel was preached through the 52 Sundays of the year.
- In homes, many families throughout the centuries have read the catechism together and thought and talked about it; sometimes the children even memorised it – maybe that is the reason why the words are so familiar for many believers in their times of misery: My only comfort is that I belong to Jesus Christ.

May this valuable heritage once more help us contemplate and ask: what are we teaching our children today? How are we doing this? What real comfort are we leaving them and their children?

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